How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness

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To the memory of my father, who awaited this book's arrival even more intently than I.

And to my mother, who affirms the imagination that drives my work.

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How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness

1.1 David Hammons, *Concerto in Black and Blue*, 2002. Mixed media, installation view. Courtesy Ace Gallery.

Introduction
How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness

How to see a work of art in total darkness? One cannot, of course, except in the most extraordinary circumstances, such as when darkness itself forms the condition of the work's visibility. That was the case with *Concerto in Black and Blue*, a 2002 installation by David Hammons that occupied three large rooms in a vast gallery in New York City (fig. 1.1).[1] At least materially, this site-specific work consisted of nothing more than the physical gallery space, its lights switched off, illuminated only by viewers carrying tiny blue lights (collected upon entry, or not) and the dim glow they generated in tandem. The work's title—equally suggestive of color, violence, music, and race—only amplified the eloquent grace of the physical situation: a cavernous blackness punch-lit by dim cones of light, which partnered with footsteps and whisperings to register the presence of other visitors.[2] To perceive the work, one had literally to become a part of it, all the while carefully negotiating a physically demanding circumstance. Indeed Hammons had not only created a situation from which one could not be fully separate without exiting it altogether; his *Concerto* also produced a dense, inscrutable social space.

A sense of kinesthetic saturation in an opaquely symbolic darkness was a requisite part of the experience. One could only know *Concerto*'s peculiar darkness from the inside, not from a position of contemplation but from one of collaboration.

Of course this meant that there was no way to gain from Hammons's *Concerto* a clear, accurate, or extensive picture of its symbolism. A passing familiarity with Hammons's previous work might advise recourse to his blackness, or, more stably, to the fact that since the late 1960s his work has examined the social conditions of black life through an allusive visual poetics of detritus often culled from the streets of Harlem, such as bottles, hair, boom boxes, branches, and the like. A viewer with this knowledge would be hard pressed to understand *Concerto*'s darkness as anything but racially black darkness. Yet this prefab reading of Hammons's work denies *Concerto*'s crucially open formal and symbolic structures. To accept its open structuring is to appreciate its thematization of racial blackness's ultimately discursive character, as well as the spatial aspect of procedures that would fasten its discourses to persons and things by staging its emergence from their "deep structures." *Concerto*'s action is contrary to this in the most literal sense, its blackness falling outside and between bodies and peoples and cultures. In the important conceptual space *Concerto* opens up, we find a remarkably capacious blackness: quite literally discolored, commingled with its contraries, contradictorily populated, the yield of a certain theatricalization. As art, then, *Concerto* accounts for blackness only insofar as it is relationally defined and erratically constituted in the social—not, at last, by reference to a foreknown certainty such as "the black artist" or a "black experience."

Concerto raises a formidable challenge to an old, widely adopted, and ever more cleverly disguised interpretive paradigm, one that sees its defining task as that of establishing or indicating a proper relation between

black artists and black art. As if to forestall *Concerto*'s closure within the obvious, limited range of metaphors to do with racially black darkness, Hammons configured the work's structures so that, with each instance of viewer participation, they would undergo meaningful alteration, making *Concerto*'s "blackness" public, participatory, and thereby perpetually innovated, not primordial or preexistent. It is representative of little more than the *idea of black culture,* one given social life in complex interactions, mediated by differently positioned subjects, languages, and forms. In this way, *Concerto* can be seen to stage the contradictory and contested processes whereby racial blackness is conceptualized and represented, and diverse subject positions are assigned, felt, embraced, or contested in relation to it.[3] The properties specific to *Concerto in Black and Blue* through which the visible and knowable appear make any claim to unmediated transparency impossible.[4]

If *Concerto*'s first public showing was understood to represent blackness as an experience on offer in a downtown gallery and available to whomever cared to partake in (or acquire) it,[5] it also made a broader point about viewer complicity in the reproduction of an increasingly inapplicable viewpoint on the nature of the work that black artists do. To acknowledge such viewer complicity is simultaneously to recognize that this viewpoint is often grounded *outside the work of art itself* and beyond the profound intentions of an artist. Unacknowledged, this complicity guarantees the unmodified perpetuation of static icons of black American culture, despite such complex and changing sociopolitical formations as Harlem, to give a pertinent example. To postpone such an acknowledgment is also to assure more inattention to the vastly more ramified presumption that black culture exists not only as distinct, but as simply available to knowledge in the form of metaphors, pictures, and persons.

To return to one of the predicaments I wish to mark with this book's title, how should we understand the vanishing of this complicity in most contemporary critical accounts of the work? What can explain *Concerto*'s reduction, in such accounts, to a thing of untroubled legibility, whether as "a gutsy public spectacle,"[6] a "confronting darkness," or, still more grossly given the piece's tranquillity, an experience "reminiscent of police cars or bombs over Baghdad"?[7] It is as if such an identification was a requisite exercise in fashioning a public reputation for *Concerto*. These reviews are not simply devoid of any detailed record of the complexities partially accounted above; they appear to commit special critical energy to wishing *Concerto*'s difficulty away, thus relegating Hammons's obdurate design to its metaphors. In a widely read arts blog, a reviewer begins by commending Hammons's light touch on the reins: "Hammons offers us here an opportunity to participate in a practice which the best art affords . . . in a form whose metaphors are worn lightly and can be treated with whatever gravity the viewer desires."[9] Later, the writer reveals the centrality of this latitude to his understanding of the work. We are told, as this intelligent survey of a few of the implications of *Concerto*'s manifest nothingness concludes, that "there is a sense . . . in which the entire history of Africans in North America can be told through reference to these two colors [black and blue]."[9] This is precisely how, in the end, *Concerto* is brought to serve this reading: its colors offering the "suggestion of the universality of African American cultural expression, . . . as that expression is bound up with the contemplation of the colors black and blue."[10] In the highest-profile art world review Hammons's work received, another writer echoed this claim, assuredly stating that "all the 'black and blue' . . . refers to African-American culture."[11] But if it does, then what, other than racism, can secure this reference?

One part of this book's project is to suggest that in venturing to answer such questions we show a greater willingness to attend to *all that remains unsaid* in a declaration like this one: "social and political events of the past 150 years have exerted a powerful influence on the emergence of African-American art as a distinct form of expression."[12] We do not yet have a way of tending openly and honestly to historical events and developments *on the near side of racism*—that is, exhortations to and about black artists and their work in the name of safeguarding this supposed distinctness—within the framework of dominant patterns of thinking "black art," "racial representation," and other like categories. What I want to insist upon here in the examples provided by the foregoing accounts of Hammons's *Concerto* is that they entail a kind of rhetorical triumph over the disorientations that are most elemental to the work, a triumph that imparts a distinctness that *Concerto* does not have. The visual and spatial effects of its darkness give rise to disorientations, as does its metaphorical suggestiveness, a trait that spatializes *Concerto*'s meaning through dissemination across several clashing idioms.[13] Still, certain "givens" about Hammons's idiom, the idea of black culture in general, or black art dominate the most authorized interpretations of *Concerto*. Paradoxically, the distinctness critics aver on the work's behalf is both sine qua non for these authoritative concepts *and* at odds with the artwork's mechanisms and logics as art. In their efforts to confer upon the work a form that it forcefully disavows, these critics attract considerable attention to the rhetorical work they would oblige *Concerto* to do. In one telling instance, the rhetoric literally transforms itself beyond the reach of logic, perceptively referring at one moment to *Concerto* as "improvisational social sculpture" generative of "enhanced states of social interactivity," before reducing it in another to a homogenizing reflection of African-American culture.[14] Should this continue,

with respect to historical explanation *Concerto* will become indistinct from so many other works by black artists understood to have accepted fully the consequences of their own prior thematization—when in fact it thematizes this very expectation.

I begin with *Concerto* because it brings into focus a problem that has long inhibited understandings of what we call "black art" in the United States: a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character. It is a mark of *Concerto in Black and Blue*'s consequentiality that it sets *the experience of black art* at a marked remove from *the artist's actual work* (as in his labor and the balance of its interpretations). Thus *Concerto* points most explicitly to the processes wherein black art is constituted fully in its difference, in scenes of reception organized by interested, structured acts of seeing, interpretation, description, and historicization. On this basis, we might consider *Concerto*'s only inarguable subject matter to be the very idea of "a David Hammons show," given this idea's cumulative cultural-historical force—Hammons was fifty-nine and long acknowledged a master by 2002—and the *type* of experience it promises but does not deliver.

In a groundbreaking 1991 essay on historiography, the feminist labor historian Joan W. Scott characterized the peculiar difficulty of experience as a historical category. "Experience," Scott writes, "can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (*when different meanings are in conflict, we readjust our vision to take account of the conflict* or to resolve it—that is what is meant by 'learning from experience' . . .). Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment. Historical explanation, therefore, cannot separate the two."[11] This book aims to extend *Concerto* and Scott's dissimilar but, I think, complementary projects in two directions: first, to the history of American art, in which

the respective emergences of the concepts "black art" and the "black artist" are seen as events in need of a new understanding; and second, to the analysis of five contemporary artistic practices that place versions of "African-American experience" under trenchant scrutiny. This study refuses the contention that "African-American art [is] a distinct form of expression," by isolating specific practices, even specific aspects of them, where the engagement of conventions, themes, problems, and tactics derived from a variety of art historical and sociopolitical contexts does not simply embarrass claims of distinctness but, far more consequently, satisfies the representational demands of artists for whom the question of cultural position is not given, but historically and socially shaped and, to a degree, a matter of preference. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* aims to diminish somewhat an encumbrance that dominates too many of our ideas about the kinds of knowledge black artists' work is permitted to reflect and generate.

It is an unfortunate fact that in this country, black artists' work seldom serves as the basis of rigorous, object-based debate. Instead, it is almost uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging "culture of origin." For all this, the art gains little purchase on the larger social, cultural, historical, and aesthetic formations to which it nevertheless directs itself with increasing urgency. And in the long term, it runs the risk of moving beyond serious thought and debate. Viewed this way, the given and necessary character of black art—as a framework for understanding what black artists do—emerges as a problem in itself.

In the first chapter of this book, "Beyond Black Representational Space," I offer what I hope are some constructive speculations about how this category came to be. I proceed from the premise that black art is a myth badly in need of a critical mythology. What goes by the name "black

art" in the United States has its roots in a set of ideas put forward some one hundred years ago. The category emerged in response to a specific need generated in two distinct but interrelated contexts. One was the Americanization of European modernisms, a process in which the generalization of "black" forms was essential. The other, around which the interest of my first chapter gathers, was the evolution of doctrinal ideologies of black culture. Despite what were often fierce battles, these formations seldom flagged in their agreement on uplift as a "common" cause for black Americans, or in their emphasis upon the artist's special role in this project. Long inattention to the antagonisms that structure these debates—and, as I argue, establish the black artist's origins in a discursive contest, not in a sociological inevitability—contributes to black art's effectiveness and durability as a category. To tend to them is to recognize that black art is not something that was always there waiting to be made or discovered. In order to exist, it had to be brought about and shaped through events of naming and regulation. Without question, a great deal of black art's apparent necessity can be explained by reference to racism's ceaselessly inventive way of isolating black realities from the spaces whose purity it would conserve by doing so. This I take to be a main implication of the above reference to "social and political events of the past 150 years" as effectively requiring the "emergence of African-American art as a distinct form." But a comparably significant reason for black art's necessity is different and more specific than systematic racism, and results from the overdetermination of some important *countermeasures* against racism and other means of withholding and distorting representation. The insistence on black art's uniqueness is also an effect of a now century-long effort to engender and keep pure a cultural domain that is uniquely our own.

But how "uniquely our own" is it? For in order to be visible or understood as a work of art, black art must concede some involvement

with the conceptual, linguistic, and historical means by which something becomes so visible or understood. By now it requires a real struggle to understand how integral the refusal of this commingling has become to the idea of black art. The routine submittal, over time, of black artists' work to prefabricated questions and uses can be looked upon as a repressive regime targeting the work's right to difference. Artists have long claimed this right. But as yet it has been a low priority in the histories that take up their work. With an eye toward correcting this somewhat, "Beyond Black Representational Space" imagines the history of black art in America as an institution of refusal, too frequently bent on ordering, as a distinct series, a range of phenomena that, when approached differently, enable us to discover chance, the discontinuous, and materiality at their very roots.[16]

The first chapter will sketch some salient features of black representational space, specifically the conditions of emergence they provided for the work I consider in the subsequent chapters. As I discuss in greater detail below, the black representational space I am presently concerned with began to take shape around the start of the twentieth century, when black art began its life as a component of a political program of uplift. Indeed, the thought of black representational space is inseparable from the forms and goals of black cultural politics. But I use the phrase more specifically to refer to the constellation formed in the accrual to black art of audience, legitimacy, visibility, and other forms of dissemination and validation. I want to refer to black representational space in a cautionary way because its vigorous promotion can imply that there exists *before politics* a basic difference between representational possibility as such and representational possibilities for black people, and that this difference has barely diminished over time. This, to me, raises the stakes of looking more closely at the historical machinations of black representational space.

In an effort to understand how black art attained its tremendous self-regulating power, I looked to the objects, documents, events, and strategies through which it asserted its coherence as a category. The historical record of the term's usage reveals a remarkable rigidity with respect to the relationships between subjects, objects, and culture that had to be established in order to put the idea of black art's necessity into play, socially and politically. With few exceptions, that record tends toward what Michel Foucault described as the naturalizing function of discourses: reference to the same object (in the present context, demonstrably "worthy" work and "positive images"); a common style in the production of statements (affirmation and rejection with minimal equivocation); constancy of the concepts (the propulsive quality of affirmative work); and reference to a common theme (the representativeness of art).[17] Apparently because it was urgent that art be seen as always at work in the interests of the race, the record favored mobile and reproducible forms—exhibitions, books, schools of artists, and eventually museums. For this reason I came to think of black representational space as a sort of society of objects, one whose members know one other and share a language, customs, and an agreement about honoring rather than testing their limitations.

Granted, and perhaps accordingly, the institutions of art have been slow to allot more than nominal amounts of space to black cultural work. It is worth considering whether advancement in this arena might actually be slowed by the continual adoption, by cultural workers concerned with visual art, of comforting but homogenizing forms for representing black artists' work, especially those developed to address the zero-option scenarios of a previous time. Historiographically speaking, these forms perpetuate the quieting of an intense commotion that has raged for over a half-century at the borders of black art. Chapter 1 provides a selective sketch of that activity, its content determined by specific

themes in some recent art which, as the subsequent chapters will show, remarks its alienation from black representational space with a striking persistence and clear intention to move on to other matters. At the very least, this makes it a necessity that we take it seriously—that is, both acknowledge and think it out from instances where ostensibly black artistic formations reveal a commitment to something like "art in general" (though seldom is their focus so narrow).

A main claim of this book is that the rhetorical operations of black representational space separate from works of art elements of their informing contexts that reflect interest in issues other than race. This is how black representational space functions as a kind of tactical segregation. Probably "segregation" has remained, until now, off our list of progressive talking points because its most ardent supporters have no reason to believe that they traffic in the kind of segregation one hollers about. Indeed for many that kind of segregation, exemplified in our time by apartheid—"the lowest extreme of racism . . . as if there were a racism par excellence"—enjoys a special status as that against which black representational space, for instance, provides a defense. Yet the same principle obtains whenever there exist regulatory procedures to aver something as self-sufficient, separate, intact, independent, identical to itself, its essence uncontaminated by any relation to an alterity.[18] The enforcement of black representational space is set forth, in a familiar turn, as a means of "diversifying the field" that won't diversify itself. Perhaps, but seldom does this diversification also entail the analysis of our role in reinforcing that field's blind spots.

If the direction of contemporary black artists' work is any indication—and I believe it is the best we have—we are fast approaching a time when this practice will no longer be viable. It is now less convincing than ever to speak of black artists as if they share an enterprise. The work of black artists for whom questions of culture are a subject but

visualizing or representing race/identity is not an end obligates us to displace race from its central location in our interpretations of this work. More, it recommends a turn toward the subjective demands that artists place on the multiple categories they occupy, and that we grant this multiplicity right of place in our methodologies. It obligates us to expand our view of the many contested fields of possibility out of which "black art" is seen to come, so that we might accommodate in our interpretations all that the work itself engaged in order to be possible. This means not simply to "diversify" one field or another but to integrate fields with what has remained external to them. Studies must widen their senses of the "object" so as better, which is to say less cautiously, to understand it vis-à-vis its relationships (artistic, political, social) with the broader field of culture that helps constitute it. This is not a matter of extrapolation: one need look no farther than the structures of their work to realize that integration is a first principle for many of these artists. As in so much postmodern practice, they redeploy as art materials and strategies culled from elsewhere than art. Because they are so often situated far beyond the confines of black representational space, their continued interest in the forms of black culture can bring welcome insights about transformations in both.

This book by no means intends to survey or thematize contemporary black artists' practice, or to mark out a specific genre or a specific aesthetic attitude. Nevertheless, for many it will be defined by its omissions. Many of the scores of artists I don't consider here are renowned figures, several of them acknowledged inspirations for those I do include. For instance, I do not address further works by David Hammons, or works by Adrian Piper or Robert Colescott, despite their inarguable conse-

quentialness for both subsequent practitioners and the very intellectual practice of decentering and dematerializing "black images" at work in the culture. Still others, including Nayland Blake, Renée Green, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems, among many, have massively impacted my thinking about this book. These artists and others merit consideration as illuminating and complex as their work is important, and happily much of this work is under way. Still, I would like to confess my very real anxiety about limiting this study as I have, since I do not wish to generate the appearance of consensus where none exists.

Yet my case studies are not arbitrary. I have singled out the practices of Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, William Pope.L, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson because—in stretching across a range of standpoints and mediums (including cut-paper silhouette, installation, drawing, painting, film and video, performance, and photography)—they allow a fairly wide view of recently developed means to address some of the biggest and oldest problems accompanying black visual representation. Recognizing that their work is in all cases very much in progress, I do not presume here to provide career pictures. To the contrary, I focus on particular moments in, and problems raised by, their practices. In so focusing, I privilege cases with important, broad historical implications and which can indicate black representational space's complex contemporaneity precisely as a matter of history.

In the chapters that follow the historiography, a certain "ambiguity of vision"—a phrase I borrow from a 1968 essay by Ralph Ellison on "The Art of Romare Bearden" and return to below—prevails. This ambiguity runs counter to the presumption that black artists and their work are transparent to social identity. One must insist on this ambiguity in order to reckon successfully with the force of an idiom that would make racial representation the foremost and central task of art by black people. It is my hope that the five closer encounters presented here will

indicate that, while limiting our attention to what these artists have to say about blackness will surely "keep the conversation going," it will also prevent the conversation from going anywhere particularly new.[19] The artists I consider here suggest an important new direction, by doing integration in ways that maintain conflict—itself an index of the difficulty of integration—as an indissoluble presence in their work. In this way the ambiguity of vision that guides my claims is also a requirement of the art to which they pertain. We know that, for several of these artists, this is a matter of commitment from the ways their personae betray an awareness of a long fixation upon the "black artist's" narrow occupational profile. Thus Julien has often spoken of his desire to intervene in "cultural spaces" rather than to claim member status in a particular community. Ligon, Pope.L, and Walker have also responded to inquiries into their respective senses of cultural locus and responsibility to black audiences by reflecting the question back to the questioner: Ligon famously insisted that "lack of location *is* my location," and Walker spoke of "the kind of art I didn't want to make."[20] For his part, Pope.L took the opportunity presented by an interviewer's knowing invocation of "individuals like [him]" to speculate about a practice that imaginatively rewrites "the black man's script" around the "process in blackness," "the lack in black."[21] To take these remarks as seriously as they're issued is to be reminded that black art is never the obvious or inevitable result of a black artist's creative labor. It is rather a regime whose sharp redress is sometimes required for meaningful aesthetic and intellectual advancement.

I stress the integrative component of their practices in order to highlight the vital importance of representational struggles between blackness (as certain forms would embody it) and what it is not. Most of this work leaves these struggles unresolved, and this irresolution constitutes a large measure of the work's interest for me. Their experiments

often begin with black cultural artifacts and institutions, broadly construed—these include iconologies of slavery and black sexual politics, ethnic museology, and the fiction of a classless "black America"—but always work outward toward broader concerns. The result is an art that assigns lead roles to forces long considered to undermine the healthy functioning of the race—forbidden pasts, the racial other, nonconformist desires, dissensus in the pursuit of "usable" solutions to present-day representational dilemmas. In this art there lies a particularly grounded and optimistic set of recommendations for reexamining extant cultural materials, engaging formidable institutions in dialogues oriented toward change, and ultimately expanding the parameters of representability in a society content to domesticate its differences to ensure its proper functioning.

The coincidence in these pages of these five artists is motivated by a variety of political and artistic factors. Several of these I have already accounted. Another factor which is important for my purposes is these artists' very unique competencies to make art show us, as Anne M. Wagner has put it, how "difference determines differently."[12] This is no simple matter of particularizing our view of these artists as individuals, over and against the tendency to view them as commonly invested "as black artists." It is a rather more complex and patient matter of seeing from project to project, work to work, how their art accentuates the difficulty of representing a historical and cultural position—an experience—crossed by contradictions and founded in an alienation from one's scripts. In this respect it reflects several of the defining concerns of its historical context. These five—Ligon, Pope.L, Walker, Wilson, and Julien—emerged as professional artists in the period spanning from roughly 1978 to 1994, a time of epochal unrest in aesthetic discourse and the spaces of political representation. Much of the unsettlement registered the cumulative effects upon art—and more specifically upon what

kinds of events, texts, and ideas belong to its history, to its conception of itself—of radical social movements of the late 1960s and the creation of new coalitional political formations. Especially influential were those developments associated with the "liberation" of women and members of racial and sexual minorities and the solidification of postcolonial populations. For not only did these developments consolidate the tendencies of conceptualism to reposition art as a hierarchical and self-regulating political context, they also manifested an ingression of the aesthetic into the political so as to make a wider range of activities visible *as politics*.[23] The focusing of tremendous analytic energy on the coterminous relation of representation to psychic, social, and cultural process sought to disarticulate the strictures of modernity and modernism, including the autonomy of art, the integrity of the artistic medium, the role of the viewer in the construction of representations—in short, the effectivities, or consequentialness, of image-making itself for everything from self-conception to the vastest institutions of knowledge. The sheer plurality of questions posed in debates over representation, particularly those resistant to exclusionary practices, pointed up the urgency, as well as the potential, of keeping the questions coming. It also recommends that one embrace the interminable nature of such questioning or, to put it more appealingly, the appeal of questioning one's condition as itself a condition.

The impact of all this activity upon contemporary politico-aesthetic discourse is so widely manifest as to seem impossible to account, at least by reference to goings-on in discrete pockets of cultural resistance, such as the art or politics of women, black, postcolonial working-class, or queer peoples. From a certain point in the not-too-distant past, thinking one's resistance in any of these domains becomes a matter of working out from a split position; of borrowing or adapting strategies employed by those differently situated than oneself; of work-

ing from a position that one continually revises. For this reason, thinking about specific contemporary interventions by many black artists into this history of resistance necessitates a view that recognizes the multiple meanings of blackness and the plurality of ways of living under the black sign but also sees beyond them to another realm of complexity. It requires a broad view in which race yields something of its boundedness in its collision with differences and circumstances that engender other kinds of affiliation and desire. In this regard it is imperative to recognize that the practices of Julien, Ligon, Pope.L, Walker, and Wilson (as well as my own) also took shape within a context shot through with experimental new critical positions on the representation of cultural difference. As I have suggested, many of these originated in feminist, queer, and postcolonial interventions before assuming a delightfully intricate and interdisciplinary hybrid form, as insights generated in one situation are appropriated for use elsewhere in exchanges among distinctive but collaborating constituencies. In interviews, Ligon, Walker, and Wilson have made special mention of critics such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Richard Dyer, and Toni Morrison. Work by a host of others—including Homi K. Bhabha, Judith Butler, Douglas Crimp, Michel Foucault, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Paul Gilroy, Philip Brian Harper, bell hooks, Kobena Mercer, Craig Owens, and Michele Wallace—would figure in a fuller genealogy of the ideas this artwork sponsors and at times extends. Julien himself played a formative role in the elaboration of a visually interested brand of black British cultural studies, even coauthoring with Mercer several important texts on black gay cultures, cinema, video art, and popular culture.

While to some degree these artists elaborate their positions in relation to those already staked, their work also exemplifies the power of art itself to establish valuable critical models. For me, instances within their practices constitute key events in the history of American art (of course,

the most durable kind of identity politics will be one that imagines an American art generous enough to accommodate an Englishman's prospect—Isaac Julien's on American cultural institutions), in part because they contribute such a necessary set of resources to late cultural criticism regarding "identity politics." All these artists purposively select signs and symbols derived from culture—including but not limited to modes, techniques, and histories of art—to create analyses, representations, and models of culture differently imagined. Almost to a number, their projects aver concern about a multiculturalism comprised of no more than competing universalities, discrete islands of politicized subjects without a politics of passage amongst and between them. They argue through the very structure of their work that recourse to bald, nonspecific *evidences* of identity has severely restricted tactical value. Likewise, they make persuasive arguments for the need to articulate, or represent, identity as a basically intersubjective and paradoxically cross-cultural affair. Moreover, and more to the point, they understand realized political subjectivity as a representational process that must rigorously engage difference. At once profoundly complex and, as these artists show, capable of being figured, this process calls us out of ourselves and our native milieus and into union and difficult communication with those who most negatively determine our self-conception (and in their very existence excuse our injustices) by remaining "outside."

In the chapters that follow, I emphasize the specific formal and thematic means that effect this avowal. In the process, I regard the work of art itself, not its capacity to illuminate or illustrate theory, as its own reward. This art intermingles aesthetic priorities and cultural interests in powerful configurations that we must nevertheless remember are works of art first and foremost, even as they fiercely defer closure and promote uncertainty. Indeed, however indispensable theory may be in making such art visible *as criticism*, one must make a concerted effort to assure

that artworks themselves (and the way they manifest problems, which is by definition specific) remain in the lead. Works of art occupy a determining role in the present framework for several reasons. The first is that this book aspires to provide neither a negative theory of black art nor a positive theory of integrationist practice. Rather, by way of a speculative historiography and series of analyses of contemporary practice, it proposes an alternative model of disciplined work on art by black subjects, on the meanings deposited and generated in that work, and on their possible relationships to less centralized areas of cultural work. This model recommends skepticism toward black art's claims to coherence and independence, as well as a critical cognizance of the category's historicity. This attitude has a praxis corresponding to something like integrationism, which justifies itself by acknowledging that there now exists a history of aesthetic practice which is all the harder to reckon with the more one allows notions of "African-American art as a distinct form of expression" to determine it. But this skepticism must also *extend* to integrationism, insofar as there exist (have long existed) forms of commitment to integration that quickly terminate in unthorough but saleable diversification procedures (we might admonish ourselves here to avoid "token hires" of a methodological sort), or worse, in the institutionalization of integration itself (if we had our druthers, there would never be a survey). Here again, letting works of art guide us—rather than an unforgiving fear of "black art" or blind faith in integration—promises to keep our ideas about art and our plans for improving the quality of those ideas grounded in what artists actually do. By "what artists actually do," I do not only mean what they make, but also the peculiar, person- and even project-specific interests and effects of their labor. Answering "the integration of what?" will always depend on the special combination of these properties that a work proposes. Without having squarely in view works of art, the claims they make, and the

relations and differences among them, one simply cannot learn and engage in a perceptual activity that is alert to integration, or an interpretive historical practice responsive to integration's influence on fixed meanings and categories.

This needs to be stated in another, less oblique way: we simply cannot *see* black artists' work until we throw it into relief against the transformations it undergoes in our inevitably social involvement with it. This is why I began this introduction with a long look at the racialist contours of the evidently inapposite, short-term reception of Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue*. And yet the relief I refer to will not result from surveying examples of the "subversive" occupation or use of the idiom "black art." (No critic failed to appreciate *Concerto*'s ironical component.) It will require an alertness to the constructed discursive and institutional, not innate, aspect of the link between artists and idioms. And paradoxical as it may seem, this alertness has to be cultivated partly through the eyes. Anne M. Wagner has already keenly observed this. "To say *subversive*," she writes, "is to offer a diversion from a more careful consideration of an art determined to be *seen* to make a difference. This is a project to be distinguished from subversion."[24]

In its deference to the "determination to be seen," albeit in a different but related register, my book reissues a challenge Wagner poses in her landmark *Three Artists (Three Women)*, of 1996. The affinity I want to imagine as existing between our two texts lies in a shared interest in balancing a picture put out of whack by the way determinations of foreknowledge about identity affects *not just our understanding but our very perception* of artists' occupations (foreknowledge of women and "their art" in the text by Wagner; of blacks and "black art" in mine). The effect Wagner wants her counterhegemonic readings of O'Keeffe, Krasner, and Hesse's production and reception to have concerns the structures that condition our perception of them as artists who "happen" to be women.

Thus for Wagner, as for me, the critical analysis of cultural difference's overdetermination of perception is constituent in her art history, not adjunct to it. Accordingly Wagner describes each case study as

> one subset in a larger field of questions about the impact of social hierarchy and order, relationship and difference, in key instances of twentieth-century American art. In addressing them I hope to make a difference to the ways those instances (and others like them) are seen and understood. I have returned to a familiar ratio, female to male, to make visible its inherent complexity and incompleteness—and above all to show that *those qualities* are importantly a matter of visual form. When translated to visual representation, the relationship need not always—did not always—involve insubordination and dependency. I think it is high time we learned to think more deeply about *the representational purposes and ambitions* of work by women, and to assess their place [not only women's] in a cultural dialogue. Only if we do so will we begin to give them their due. What would be better than to stimulate even deeper interest in [the art work] women have made, and to fuel other efforts to explicate them? Such efforts are always necessary to understand works of art, but they are especially necessary when the artist is a woman.[23]

I want to echo this appeal, *in the name of relationship and difference*, to the communities of casual, critical, and historical reception now waiting to receive and make knowledge from the results of Julien, Ligon, Pope.L, Walker, and Wilson's respective practices. I want to insist that because it reimagines the very representational structure of its chosen subjects, supplying us with new terms for their understanding, to take this art seriously is to traffic in the unfamiliar. The five cases presented

here take race and racial meaning, as we seek to define these formations by reference to visual form, as a general problem or subject of record. But because they explore this problem to such vastly different ends, this is where their similarities—to "black art" or to each other—end.

While at some level each of these artists' projects is intensely personal, none of them ever employs personality strictly as a private matter. Rather, the subject, its investments, and its investiture by images and others frequently center these explorations. Each *works* the themes that claim her or his attention—historical representation, identity tropes and identity performance, museums, "black objects," among others—in important new ways. Following the first chapter, which historicizes black representational space, I turn to Kara Walker's wall-based silhouette installations. When Walker debuted these works in 1994, her decision to utilize raw and sexually explicit imagery, purposefully evocative of slavery but obviously keyed to the present, generated a forceful retaliation against their challenges. In their attacks, Walker's critics repeatedly invoked an image of the U.S. cultural landscape upon which they positioned themselves as privileged witnesses. This chapter examines how Walker's work in this mode radically reconceptualizes landscape in order to invent a past capable of disrupting just such performances of the present. I situate Walker's tableaux first in relation to the nationalistic function of grand historical landscape painting in the United States and, second, in relation to the structural conventions in dominant nineteenth-century pictorial and narrative depictions of the South. I then suggest that Walker, by reference also to conceptualist interventions into the sanctity of viewers' space, explodes the pictorial confines of landscape representation in order to situate the viewer squarely in it.

In this way she renders landscape an always political conception of the world, one in which the importance of the witness function can never be downplayed nor quite depended upon to produce reliable testimony. In addition, I reflect on the necessity, for Walker and others, to establish images of the past that can better accommodate its cultural function, which is to facilitate a virtually unlimited number of different perspectives on its meaning. Importantly, Walker's project in this work authorizes a history of unfixed power relations and counternormative desires as internal to cultural and national identity.

Chapter 3 examines two works that explore the materialization of racial differences in the context of museums and their use by audiences. I consider two Baltimore-specific works created roughly a decade apart: Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992–93), which saw him reinstall part of the Maryland Historical Society to reflect aspects of that state's fractious race relations; and Isaac Julien's film *Baltimore*, a fantastical reconstruction of museum culture that winds a course through the city's Walters Art Museum, Great Blacks in Wax Museum, and George Peabody Library. Both projects are introduced in terms of their contributions to that brand of institutional critique where artists make critical interventions into existing museum schemes. My questions for *Mining* focus on the possibilities it offers the viewer of transforming, or imagining as transformed, power relations in the specific institutional matrix that the Maryland Historical Society and its situation in Baltimore comprise. I argue that *Mining* may tell a too-familiar tale of that situation, one that leaves unaddressed the museum's ability to establish and maintain something like "cultural order" in a particularly troublesome political context. By contrast, *Baltimore* interpenetrates museum spaces as a function of fantasy. Julien's film, an eleven-and-a-half-minute, three-channel film projection, presents the viewer with a seamless fusing of distinct spaces, thus confounding the terms, if not the fact, of their separation.

Importantly, *Baltimore*'s critique moves in a vertical as well as a horizontal direction, between levels as well as institutions of representative culture, invoking blaxploitation and Afro-futurism to speculate about the values that inform the social practices of commemoration and enshrinement. Using the language of film to imagine new relationships between Baltimore's racial subcultures, Julien restitutes the institutions to the complex urban site they share.

The fourth chapter addresses Glenn Ligon's preoccupation with the museum's most privileged object: painting. I look at the development of Ligon's text-painting practice, beginning with his early-career negotiation of abstract expressionism, in terms of the fraught cultural space that painting has become since serious challenges were first posed to modernism's hegemony. Ligon's text paintings, I argue, capitalize on and amplify the tension in that space. In their appropriation of charged, recognizable languages of race and sexuality and their transformation of that language through repetition into shamelessly sumptuous paint surfaces, these works constitute a series of visual arguments against myriad forms of closure. This strategy, Ligon reveals, aligns late modernist aesthetics and cultural objectification in illuminating ways. By merging his engagement with painting's materiality and his redress to exclusions specific to the medium, Ligon's text paintings produce a culturally specific approach to modernist abstraction, one centered on leaving open the very spaces that the dominant account of abstraction would close, most importantly those of viewer and work. His text paintings affirm the necessity of remaining in, rather than resolving, contradiction, by incorporating elements of the social texts embedded in the medium of painting alongside those excluded from it. For Ligon, it is precisely the signification of the boundaries of painting—a discourse dependent, like race, on a vexed logic of seers and seens—that is the issue.

I conclude the book with a chapter that shifts decisively (strategically) away from the consideration of objects to consider the interventionist actions of William Pope.L and their ambitious modifications of social ideas. In many respects, concerns prevalent throughout the book—above all, the need to emphasize the place of the subject, and of desire, in order responsibly to debate representations of culture, their uses and effects—congregate in Pope.L's intensely disorienting investigations into the subject/object relation. Pope.L pushes identity's status as an object of consumption to often uncomfortable extremes, using himself as a sign-generating mechanism that confounds rather than confirms the information transmitted by race, class, and gender. I will consider especially how, by amplifying the discursivity of the subject through symbolic embodiments, Pope.L reveals ineradicably human dynamics in the construction of public spaces—such as in crawls for which he dons a business suit and "gives up his verticality" in order to signify one of the most familiar yet seldom acknowledged attributes of so-called lower-class standing. I end the book with Pope.L's practice because its claims about subjectivity and representation are extremely complex, even unsettling, especially in its commitment to dispossession as an essential component of identity formation. It suggests in so many ways that identity as we know it cannot survive certain encounters with difference—not by any means a suggestion to be taken lightly. More to the point of this book's own project, it repositions the object of art in relation to the culture that it would represent. Art now functions, as much as previously, as political. Only now we are faced with a politics of obscurity, as when one obscures one's political role so as to better articulate it.[26]

With this comes a whole set of challenges for our conceptions of art and politics as entities that provide safe harbor for subjects. According to the most serious implications of this work, we can look to neither art

nor politics for confirmation of the wholeness we think we need to get along in these black bodies of ours. In their ways, Julien, Ligon, Pope.L, Walker, and Wilson refer us to the traffic between subjects and ideas: where use does not merely burnish cultural forms but alters them; where the interaction of practices and institutions generates problematic situations; where artistic subjects contracted by compulsory representativeness transform their constitution by power into something more workable, more like a work of art.

Perhaps clearer and more present is the challenge which is posed to art institutions by a vast and growing range of practices that refuse to be conditioned by the abstraction that is "black art." Black art, we are told, is "art by artists whose skins happen to be black." While indeed this seems eerily close to the truth, it begs a vitally important question: What exercises of power had to take place in order to grant this coincidence the status of an institution (which more and more practitioners today refuse)? Chapter 1 attempts further to elaborate this question and venture some answer. But my deepest wish for this project is that its necessary inadequacy will provoke others to offer answers of their own.

1
Beyond Black Representational Space

What becomes of black art when black artists stop making it? Without being much remarked as yet, the category's instability now defines it far more clearly than do its supposed contents, as "black art" has come to have less and less descriptive bearing (which is not to say influence) on the work many black artists actually produce. In seeking to restructure the symbols of an experience varyingly subsumed by its "blackness," these artists do not endeavor simply to do more than just race work with their art, but precisely *to be seen as* doing so. One of my objectives here is to underscore the losses entailed by mistaking the appreciably black spirit of this art for a wholesale enlistment in a category that would become its only context. For this practical transformation brings with it the more difficult truth that the category "black art" is now exposed as one among those many residual identity frameworks painstakingly constructed for use in a time whose urgencies are simply not those of our own. That is, where the struggle for recognition is concerned, in some measure the terms of victory may themselves have precipitated a new struggle of an altogether different kind: to trip up or thwart recognition, to open a

negotiation that draws looking beyond the surface. The projects discussed in the chapters that follow are just the most visible signs of a shift in which the category "black art"—as an enclosing epistemological structure reinforced through acts of recognition—has become a historical problem in need of consideration. This chapter comprises a speculative historical analysis of the category's attainment of an authority with which it would articulate the black artist's project before she, and it, have the chance to speak for themselves.

In a seminal essay from 1988, Stuart Hall, in an effort to explain the effective mobilization within postwar black British culture of structuralist and poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity and culture, observes a shift from a set of "struggles over the relations of representation" to a "politics of representation itself."[1] Hall describes a momentous displacement of focus, at one moment, on the development of authenticating antiracist representations of blackness in Britain, a development largely suppressive of black difference: while at another, claims to black Britishness had come to be represented as constituting a fragmented field of knowledges and identities engaged in an interminable contest over representational hegemony, and this contest itself mounted a challenge to the traditional, mimetic concept of representation that had hitherto reigned.[2] Thus the recognition of difference came to challenge the hegemony based on "the innocent notion of an essential black subject" whose integrated ego an extensive set of cultural representations collectivizes into a steady foundation. The emergence of difference into the space of cultural criticism necessitates the realization that the "black subject cannot be represented without reference to the divisions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity," and that coping with this complication means destabilizing "particular conceptions of black masculinity," some of which were generalized in order to define what counts as politics or progress within black cultures, and to deflect attention from

the definers' contingency, as well as investigating class's discrepant determination of race and "crossing questions of racism irrevocably with questions of sexuality."[3] But if we fixate too heavily on the transitional nature of this development, it becomes harder both to ask certain crucial questions about the current embattled state of "black art" and to posit replies that are aptly historical. For the "end of the essential black subject" also brings its history into a different light, where that subject's disparate identifications and desires, affiliations and commitments begin to make extremely problematic the ways in which we typically take up the black cultural text[4] *from inside our cultural space.*

So thinking black representational space historically requires us to modify somewhat the standard rendering of Hall's formulation (as a decisive swing or sea change), specifically in order to recover the politics of representation that had to be overwhelmed—which is to say straightened out so as not to cross or be crossed with other categories, and thus misidentified or drawn off course—in order to do the undeniably necessary, if now obfuscating, work of achieving a foothold within the relations of representation. Indeed, black representational space can only be thought as the effect of a politics of representation raging ever since "blackness" could be proposed as the starting point of a certain mode or type of artistic depiction. At this point I should clarify the two functions I assign to black representational space in this discussion. In one, it designates a cultural territory whose coming about is the reward of success in what Hall identifies as the "struggle over relations of representation," which is to say the means of production of "black images." Relevant examples include the kinds of real, material advances in the lived conditions of black intellectuals that are essential to our political survival: professional positions; opportunities to publish, exhibit, debate publicly, etc. But there is a second function seemingly required to maintain, enrich, and extend these essentials. This is what I wish to question on

the basis that these territories are often burdened by obligation to old discursive practices and symbolic structures that need updating from time to time.[5] The second function designates a conceptual terrain, outlined by philosophical norms, wherein the politics of representation is itself represented as if by nature it is an *intra*cultural matter. The limits of this terrain are at once marked and determined by such things as compendia of black artists' work, or accounts of watersheds and breakdowns in debates about the exemplariness or "positivity" of certain representations, the aberrance of others, and the much-discussed "transcendence" of race by some. Such constant policing of black representational space not only preserves it but renaturalizes it.

The imprint of this politics of representation upon contemporary thinking about black artists' occupations and output is deep. Yet it is largely absent from the texts that treat them.[6] Therefore I open this chapter with a consideration of conversations among black Americans dating from a century ago, whose participants were quite explicitly doing the politics of representation. To study them seriously, one must engage not only with authoritative representations of black culture and politics, but with authoritative *theories* of representation of black culture and politics as well.[7] One must note the enormous influence upon later theories of black representation and conceptions of black artistic subjectivity of efforts to grow Negro culture that were mobilized from the early 1920s, perhaps most famously by W. E. B. Du Bois and his interlocutors.[8] I want to suggest that by thinking black representational space historically—as a set of practices diligently maintained over years of intense work and debate, but inadequate critical self-examination—we can better understand how blackness itself has become "an obstacle to going ahead" for many who take art to be a function of change.[9] The work of many contemporary black artists reveals that, for them, black is but one mode among the many in which they elect to work. But in the great

number of foolproof apparatuses to locate and underscore the cultural identity of the artist as the site and seat of the work's significance (some of these we saw at work on Hammons's installation), we come face to face with an especially pertinent problem that history poses for the present. Importantly, this history is not only a story of racism. This necessitates a historical vision of black art that assays the disproportionate influence of a past which creeps forward to speak in the present's voice; a vision that understands this past in terms of both limitations imposed and freedoms won.

It also entails more rigorous attention to the scene of reception, since black representational space is reconsolidated whenever one arrives at an interpretation that supports the view that all black artists make demonstrations of blackness and/or privilege black viewers. Of course many black artists make their work with black viewers in mind. But few serious ones can afford to limit either their practice or their market in this way. Moreover, because looking at art is a profoundly social act, it is in fact possible for any viewer invested with the power of racial gazing to seal an object in black representational space.

Some readers may find it implausible that the experience of looking at a work of art can be linked with the social process of racialization. I believe it is only implausible if we fail to consider the implications of the question, What makes "black art" black? What functions have to be performed successfully in order to secure that identification? What legitimates that identification as a positive one? And, What *other* kinds of work does the positive racial identification of an artwork permit one to do? The work I discuss below continually draws these questions to the fore, directing our attention to the operations that frustrate the kind of gazing that establishes positive identification, by which I mean certain knowledge of its content and motivation. This is not, I think, undertaken to deracialize looking (though it is critical for us to continue imagining

what that would require) so much as to create a space within a context dominated by such habits for other types of identification—keyed to their specificity as artworks. This recommends a practice of strategic formalism, one interested in the peculiarity of works within their varied contexts of meaning, responsive to the specific artistic operations that often manifest relations and differences to which culturalist regimes of reception must remain blind.

Frantz Fanon's account in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) of the socio-discursive formation of blackness under racist conditions has been particularly helpful to my thinking about the connection between racialization and art spectatorship.[18] While they account for colonial circumstances and were seldom issued as remarks *about* representation in the sense that I intend, Fanon's insights into representation are invaluable for their intersubjective approach and at times astonishing optimism. In Fanon's oft-cited account, the black body, objectified in its blackness, functions as a black representational space par excellence. However, the standard reading of Fanon's text views the resultant space—which Fanon calls "consciousness," though many misname it "race consciousness"—solely as a remnant of racism. This reading ignores the ample evidence that the image of blackness Fanon deftly constructs in *Black Skin, White Masks* betrays its self-made, even compulsive qualities. The discovery of these qualities clearly caused Fanon some difficulty. The passages that betray this discomfort help to clarify that in order to grasp black representational space, we must accept two outlooks on racialization that are widely believed to be opposed as instead complementary and even mutually complicit. The first of these regards the racialization of black difference strictly as an objectivizing, persecutory action; the other regards it as in some measure elective. Locating black representational space in a social dialectic implies a view of black art in which

forms considered external to it play indispensable roles in its establishment and understanding alike.

Such a view also understands the social, cultural, ideological, and historical dimensions of the energies spent to establish black art, in particular events, within the frameworks that black representational space demarks. Thus, the third and final section of this introduction takes up a number of reformations of black representational space. I will look in particular at instances where various cultural authorities, black and not, appeal to the formation "black artist" in order to give substance to what seem to be their own desires for representativeness in black artists' work.

The next two sections discuss the establishment and legitimization of black representational space by two means. The first, the social-phenomenological, concerns the establishment of black representational space within the inherently tenuous framework of subjectivity, collective experience, and their relationships to race concepts. The second, or discursive, refers to the institutional forms and representational practices that work to legitimize black subjects' depictions of and references to black life within similarly confining terms, in effect seeking forms of political enclosure that can compensate for the lack of any closure available to us as subjects.

FANON AND THE SUBJECTIVE GROUND OF BLACK REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE

What makes "black art" black? The seeming simplicity of this question belies the complexity of the means by which works of art appear to be socialized in this way. I would like to suggest that in this process,

conception too often replaces perception, in effect suspending the aesthetic life of the object and replacing it with a predetermined social one. Here is an example: "At its simplest, a 'black show' is an exhibition of work by artists whose skins are black"[11]—an account in which the complicating specificity of the artwork literally makes no difference. William James described this approach as a form of isolation rooted in an act of consciousness that pulls things from the perceptual flux in order to supply knowing (and, by extension, knowledge) with data. Activity and change—for James, incontrovertible features of this flux—are alienated by concepts. "Concepts," James writes, "make things less, not more, intelligible, when we use them seriously and radically. They serve us more practically than theoretically. Throwing their map of abstract terms and relations round our present experience, they show its bearings and let us plan our way."[12] Thus James sought to restore the focus of philosophy to the acts of perception that concepts shortchange, in part by exploring what it would mean to "drop conception."[13]

The concept that serves the practical identification of black art requires that blackness provide the art with a principle of intelligibility, as something that "lets us plan our way." An expedient, it is a prime example not only of the presumed knowability of identity, but of how the particular need to know that customarily affects us in matters of identity (perhaps especially where identity differences are at play) obliterates the differences between things by domesticating them. Here is how this identification seems to be secured. First, we "read" certain signs (sociological data, particular forms, or subject matter) as "racial information." Because this act presupposes a correlation between the work's significations and a set of race concepts, it attaches the object's denotators to a predetermined range of possible connotators. Second, we discern or devise "relevant" external correspondences, which ground a more decisive third move that establishes equivalences with what we are considering and have already

considered, suspected, or perhaps just wondered. This kind of social-phenomenological process needs help—some prelegitimated rooting in the world beyond the encounter—in order to be effective. Here, I suggest, is where the legitimating historical-discursive function of black representational space enters the picture and assumes an indispensable role. This discursive "content" is axiomatic for the enactment of a racial identification, literally supplying the gesture with meaning, history, *effectiveness*—no matter what power one would grant "black skin" itself. And paradoxically, it comprises both the phobic and terrorizing conjurings of racism (which Fanon called the "historico-racial schema") and the accomplishments of a lovingly assembled representational tradition.

Doubtless, infinite variations on the process I am describing exist, and in that variance lies proof of the pointlessness of seeking finally to diagnose it. Yet there can be no doubt that we need a more concerted attention to the difficulty we seem to have in imagining the work of "artists whose skins are black" apart from the notion of racial art. What kind of difficulty do we face here? Until now, what has been impossible is not the conception of a black artist who doesn't make black art but rather a substantial basis upon which to advance defend, and/or demonstrate such a claim.

Fanon rigorously treats the scopic foundations and conscious and unconscious mechanisms of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*.[14] The essay "The Fact of Blackness," in particular, demonstrates the fundamental instability of the kind of blackness that is imagined to provide a visual gift to its perceiver and stable habitus to its inhabitant. Within this phenomenological mediation on the effects of racism on subjectivity, Fanon is concerned to find precise terms for the racialized Other's otherness. To do this, Fanon tends specifically to the contours of his objectification, where, he suggests, the means by which blackness is secured as identity can be read. The result is a searching account of blackness as

formed in, not simply as, difference: Fanon's text constitutes black representational space as split, as it accounts both the variety of discursive practices that would reduce its narrating subject to one among so many subjects of racism and the more pronouncedly unstable representation of race that Fanon's accounting itself becomes. His assessment of the unresolved struggle within the black subject between social reality and psychic representation, objecthood and being, conception and perception, is as painstaking as it is pained. While its agony indicates Fanon's bewilderment at the prospect of representing such a condition and reflects an incontrovertible truth about racism's violence, the text, in its astonishing use of visual and artistic metaphors, suggests very strongly that the externalization of racism camouflages key aspects of the total practice that in fact organizes racism.

In an oft-cited passage, Fanon describes the process of racialization by recourse to a social scenario centered on a look. There, the black subject (whom Fanon writes as himself if inconsistently) is beset by the projective racial fantasy of a white child. Spotting Fanon, the child announces, "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!"[51] The passage is widely considered to be the sine qua non of Fanon's theory of racism, an explanation of racism's virulent proliferation through culture as a discourse continually ratified by irrefutable gazes. However puerile its logic, the doctrine enters the black subject's consciousness from the outside, already fully matured. But elsewhere Fanon suggests that this reading may give much too much credit to racism, may remove an emphasis that he is careful, if not always clear, to place on the black subject's at least partial compliance with this logic. True, the child's apprehension illustrates the mechanism by which racial blackness achieves human embodiment, to reify and envelope the black subject in what Fanon calls a "crushing objecthood." It also invests the subject with a will to overcome determination by a representation in whose fashioning the subject does

not partake. And this will drives the subject's pursuit of the recognition denied in the "formative" encounter (whose formativeness means a great deal more to *this* way of understanding racism than to Fanon's final characterization of the subject). But reading Fanon carefully, we find that he formulates racism in something other than this totalizing way. Instead, he describes a play of subjects, objects, desires, and discourses in which racial blackness is always caught up but never comes to fruition.

Because Fanon's account favors perception over conception, it suspends blackness in the place between the interpellator (above, the child subject) and the interpellated (the black subject). Nowhere does Fanon's text itself confuse or elide this blackness with a body or object. Even when, for purposes of exposition, Fanon personifies blackness as himself, it fails to quite catch up with him; some space always remains. The space that the child's fearful projection "shatters" is precisely that of a black consciousness understood as entirely a house of one's own making. Rather, Fanon describes the space of racialization as a makeshift dwelling "weaving me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (BSWM, 111). There is power in numbers, and the density of Fanon's "thousand" is striking. This density conveys the violently volitional quality of the interpellation in which Fanon is caught. But it cannot diminish the reading effect of the "weave," particularly its optimistic connotations of open structuring, breathability, and impending unravelment. Fanon, moreover, figures it as an interruption in the otherwise "slow composition of *my self as a body* in the middle of a spatial and temporal world" (BSWM, 111; Fanon's emphasis). In response, Fanon launches a project of reconstitution that dissects the preconstituted black subject in search of a figure that can better adequate his experience of it. Indeed, he performs these dissections upon visual representations in which, his prose indicates, he loses rather than finds himself: "I

cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear" (BSWM, 111). But Fanon does not appear. He remains unmoored, shifting between the sites marked at once by the "I," the anticipated figure, and the characterization whose imminent arrival would unite them. These passages are exemplary of the way Fanon crafts his reconstruction through a series of creative gestures that renders consciousness of the black body insistently in relation to its structuring antagonisms and continual reconstruction in and through representations. This strategy underlines the discursive rather than the natural character of the "negative" representational space into which the black subject is thrust, which action she might answer by establishing a "positive" space of her own.

Fanon also casts that subject as an agent in the structuring of that space, which space Fanon also, and not incidentally, refuses to permit to close within the lines of his text. In the analytical portion of "The Fact of Blackness," Fanon's main expository tools are what he calls the "historico-racial schema" and the "racial epidermal schema." These aim to attach a bevy of "scientistic" and culturalist assignations "*provided . . . by the other*" to the black body and to its consciousness of self, annexing them to justify the claims of raciology (BSWM, 112; my emphasis). In this economy, the schemas are the means of abstraction whose ends yield the objectified black body and the subject's consciousness of that abstraction as her possession and defining struggle. Fringe benefits include a stake in reason, history, and culture—three of the biggest dividends modernity can pay. The racial epidermal schema comes bundled with a "corporeal malediction" (blackness as genetic deficiency), thereby supplying, via biology, the Negro's raison d'être within the Great Chain of Being: as the very picture of ill-fated "human development." The his-

torico-racial schema disburses twice over, giving history and culture simultaneously in the form of exoticism. In other words, these "benefits" are purchased at the cost of full-time existence as an abstraction with a permanently depreciated value.

Crucially for Fanon, however, the schemas are discourses that one can decline. The desire he expresses at the close of *Black Skin, White Masks* in fact indicates the long-term trajectory of the schemas' analysis in "The Fact of Blackness." "At the end of this study," Fanon writes with a telling opacity, "I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness" (BSWM, 232). Indeed, when Fanon characterizes the schemas, he interjects two subtle distancings (between schema and subject) that appear to ensure that openness. First, his self-narrativizing subject calls the corporeal schema "alternative," an intrusive and overpowering metonym for the unmediated bodily experience already theorized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[16] The schema denies the Negro the possibility of this self-determination: "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness" (BSWM, 232). And yet in the very next line, Fanon's subject appears to have recovered self-determination:

> I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table.... [A]ll of these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (BSWM, 232)

In order to relate his situation, Fanon has to negotiate at once a representation and a form of "implicit knowledge" of self. His prose, then, bears out the fact that the body objectified in "black consciousness" that racism holds out "as an absolute density, as filled with itself, a stage preceding any invasion" is not his condition, even if it would position itself as a condition of his participation in "the white world." Rather, it becomes the object of his mythology.

It is all the more striking that when Fanon describes the historico-racial schema, he does not talk of something that seals him from without: "I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin'" (BSWM, 112). While this litany of stereotypes may originate somewhere out there, Fanon "discovers" their deployment from within. The series is a discomfiting mix of actual and phantasmatic forms Fanon says he "had sketched 'beneath the corporeal schema.'" The formulation "my blackness" reflects this double bind, and in doing so suggests still more unsettlingly than before the role of complicity in the construction of archetypal black representational spaces.

The confusion of resistance and capitulation is paramount here, as Fanon suggests that neither position can ever be inhabited fully. The production of subjects for racism depends on the closure of such positional spaces; and this mode of production contributes much to what Homi Bhabha, in a discussion of Fanon, appositely calls a "tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision."[17] If Fanon's rhetoric counters with an image of identity as an "open door," this image figures vision's failure as securing the possibility of ontological resistance. Notably, the historico-racial schema, as written, does not overwhelm the subject with the ter-

rifying clarity of an entirely fictioned history. It disperses the subject, as Fanon demonstrates when, turning from a description of the inherited bodily vocabulary to an analysis of how these are worked out *through* him, he allows quotation and question marks and other interdictions to proliferate in the text. Other forms of punctuation seem to aid Fanon in this strategy of spatializing the black subject, such as when he resorts to the language of preliminary drafting to render his involvement in the process: "Beneath the corporeal schema . . . I had sketched the historico-racial schema." And later, when he decides, "I did not want this revision, this thematization" (BSWM, 111).

Fanon thus portrays the schemas as subject to an ongoing self-making practice that opposes their efficacy. No paradigmatic representations of blackness—not even the "black subject"—endure to the close of his text without the text suffusing them with traces of the discontinuous intersubjective relations that identity paradigms would overcome. The radicalism of Fanon's sketch lies in its ability to rescale the currency of such representations against the contingency of one's lived experience of them.[18] And to a large degree, it is the very sketchiness of Fanon's account that makes this reading possible, by compelling us to read for the literary in order to keep Fanon's subject in focus from page to page. For it is by literary means that Fanon articulates in terms of difference processes that racism can only think in terms of invariability. As Joan Scott reminds us, it is crucial to literature's operation as criticism that it "relativizes the categories history assigns, and exposes the processes that construct and position subjects."[19]

In a deeply affecting reading of Fanon's current appeal, Stuart Hall has suggested that we reconsider *Black Skin, White Masks*' curious pride of place in defenses of racial essentialism, pointing out that the "grain of [Fanon's] text runs incontrovertibly towards the recognition that an account of racism which has no purchase on the inner landscape and the

unconscious mechanisms of its effects is, at best, only half the story."[20] Despite the Manichaeism its title evokes to many, one of the book's clearest lessons, Hall brilliantly observes, is that "Racism, for Fanon, is never simply something which the Other does to Us."[21] The very difficulty of Fanon's text, Hall suggests, indicates the trouble Fanon himself (or anyone?) would have had characterizing racism in a way so unforgiving to its victims. Yet "victim" is the very "thematization" (elsewhere, the "amputation") that Fanon refuses "with all my strength." *Black Skin, White Masks*, Hall suggests, is germane to contemporary practices of the politics of representation because "Fanon's 1952 text anticipates poststructuralism in a startling way." The dependency complex, Hall notes, is "the outcome of a double process, primarily economic . . . subsequently the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization [Fanon's term]—of this inferiority."[22] Fanon's accounting of the constitutional instability, conflicting desires, and openness contributing to the psychosocial construction of subjects for racism evidences the ineradicable presence of the other *within* a type of black representational space, beginning with the body's. At the very least, it signals the possibility that within such spaces there remains room to rearticulate their contents as something other than a plenitude that makes present of positive what racism would erase or negate. This would be another way of declining what Hall describes as "a relationship to self . . . a performance of self, which is scripted by the colonizer."[23] This possibility galvanizes agency by restituting the subject to "relationships to self" and "performances of self" in which race informs, but does not determine, aesthetics and politics. As Hall concludes with reference to Fanon's ongoing conversation with proponents of Negritude, the francophone cultural movement Fanon saw as promoting "the illusion of black culture":[24] "How could the black body function foundationally when, as Fanon shows, it is so manifestly constructed in narrative ('there were legends, stories, history, and above

all, historicity'), through desire, in fantasy, through the exorbitant play of 'lack' and 'excess'? This is surely the lesson we should take from Fanon's long and uneasy dialogue with the Negritude movement."[25]

The readings above decompress the subject of *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to show how the text itself satisfies what Fanon called a "longing" "to be abroad with the other" (BSWM, 112). If, rather than reading *Black Skin, White Masks* as paradigmatic, we recognize how greatly forms of longing will vary, we can appreciate the book as a model of how creative, aesthetic action upon the signs of black difference can oppose black representational space's annexation of private space by rules of social governance. This is what unites the concerns of the book's narrating subject with the standpoint from which so many contemporary black artists' practices seem to issue. The difficulty of establishing a place within black representational space for this kind of desire is differently expressed in the dismay many black artists express at the notion that they have an obligation to the "black community." Julien, for one, has said, "I don't see myself as being representative of any community. I see myself as a cultural activist who tries to make interventions into cultural space and those interventions may draw on a very personal experience."[26] Julien conceptualizes intervention as a tactic that pushes against the confines of "community" not to evacuate it but to rearticulate it as a function of a larger cultural space through which thought must pass in order to find its way to community. If the "community," and the black representational space it implies, have come to function as *obstacles* for contemporary practitioners, it is because frequently they carry over into the realm of aesthetic experimentation an expectation that one will adopt a set of general priorities as one's own. Because of the community's extraordinary power to annex all thought of viable action in the aesthetic as well as the social and political realms, it requires fierce resistance to enlarge the context for what might terminally be regarded

as "black art" forms. In this regard, it is extremely pertinent that we can hear the echo of Fanon's dilemma in Harold Rosenberg's description of the artistic problem, as "the obstacle to going ahead . . . in the course of [whose] engagement a mind is created."[27]

SHAPING BLACK REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE

The remainder of this chapter will consider some signal moments in the development of black representational spaces tailored to the purposes of artistic representation. This work was difficult—at times it feels insolent—but struck me as needed. Needed because each of the practices I discuss here, and many that I don't, appears to involve some confrontation between a contemporary practitioner and that historical overdetermination of the figure "black artist" which distinguishes the American context. They evoke "black artist" in the manner that Fanon invokes "Negro subject": as a script or "performance of self" that one may need creatively to decline, for purposes of cultural survival. In order for the work of such artists, who adopt cultural subjects without the goal of simply visualizing difference, to fully enter history, there may need to be a massive disturbance in the ways we take up their work—thematically, methodologically, structurally. In this, some special emphasis will have to be given to the terms in which the work addresses itself to history, how it may differently articulate its relationship to this history. What is at stake here, though, is not so much the art as what it is asked to do,[28] when a bevy of "thematizations"—aesthetic, cultural, moral—attach like barnacles to the designation "black artist" and anything one touches. In what follows, then, I consider some of the less than obvious conditions required for the establishment of this difficulty.

In a setting devoted to grappling with works of art, the "'epidermalization' of the racial look"[29] has a particularly disruptive effect. In trying to understand this effect, it may be worth our while to linger over the uneasy implications of Hall's observation that, for Fanon, epidermalization is never merely a function of racism, but that efforts to resist it can compound its consequences when inattentive to the terms of one's defense against its violences. Time and time again, its effects reappear in considerations of black artists' work, as if sewn into its very fabric. I want to suggest that we will have an easier time getting hold of its mechanisms if we recognize how epidermalization insinuates itself in these looking situations partly as an effect of an archived knowledge concerning "artists whose skins are black" which construes such artistic subjects as representative by default and duty.

But what grounds this knowledge historically? Certainly the negotiation of U.S. race relations during the post-emancipation period afforded little time or space for the contemplation of art and aesthetics. But doubtless later conversations about just these themes bore the imprint of this fraught ecology. Specifically, in the immediate aftermath of federally sponsored Reconstruction (ended in 1877), the pursuit of civil rights was stymied by the introduction of Jim Crow laws authorizing racial segregation in a majority of American states. It was in this violently riven context that an American vocabulary of "black representation" had to develop. When black representational space was a way of life, and a rare privilege when and where it existed at all, the competence to correlate race and culture was a life function, a matter of survival. This entailed cultivating sites of freedom in a world structured—by the powers vested in persons ranging from judges and police to railway managers and "citizen legislators"; by the restriction of access to amenities as different as libraries and plumbing; by the enforcement of nearly all traffic of the races amongst one another: in schools, mines, prisons,

and even institutions for the blind—to make just such a thing seem permanently provisional, if it could be imagined at all.

The idea of black culture, then, developed in the shadow of Jim Crow and often compensatorily. Both formations reflect an aspect of their time, in which the institutionalization of difference was the prevailing mode for organizing knowledge of the world. As Foucault reminds us, the nineteenth century was important in the formation of systems of Western thought, for it was the era when the self-evident nature of differences between things moved to the center of Western knowledge: "A profound historicity penetrates into the heart of things, isolates and defines them in their own coherence, imposes upon them the forms of order implied by the continuity of time."[30] Foucault tells us that things, now orphaned to their integrity, "become increasingly reflexive, seeking the principle of their intelligibility only in their own development, and abandoning the space of representation."[31] Here Foucault describes the emergence of a regime that abstracts by particularizing—a move that entails a simultaneous retreat from difference into identity and, more specifically, the development of a conception of identity whose very need for survival obliges it to deny difference whether from without or within. To abandon the "space of representation" was simultaneously to create another in one's own image. However for most Negro Americans, a full abandonment of the space of representation was simply not an option. A doubly directed black culture was necessary, its most ardent mainstream proponents argued, as a way to demonstrate, on the one hand, entitlement to representational space within a nation largely determined to withhold it; and on the other, to build support for collective investment in that space and the practice of its cultivation. And yet so many histories of black art in America dwell on the former aspect of this bidirectional process to the exclusion of the latter. Much is made of the perception of consensus among black artists,

yet seldom is there open speculation about where this perception might find ready resources on the near side of the problem.

Structurally speaking, the idea of black culture in America was always integrationist. James A. Porter's 1943 publication *Modern Negro Art*, widely regarded as the defining text of African-American art history, already recognized the perception of consensus as an obstacle to the integration of American cultural history. Porter's text is at its most ambitious and, perhaps, least conventionally "historical" on the subject of integration. Two examples reveal what makes his book the benchmark it is, particularly as a thoroughgoing social history of art that bears its politics courageously. The first, a passage from a chapter titled "The New Horizons of Painting," finds Porter at pains to advance integrationism in reference to the staffing of arts programs for black children. He observes:

> Except in outstanding cases, the white contribution is anonymous, and greater recognition is due to the Negro artist-teachers in W.P.A. work, or those who have been forwarding parochial art programs. Through them, we feel that the Negro artist will be enabled to integrate race-feeling and race-culture with his heritage of citizenship and cultural interpenetration. Final emphasis, however, must be placed on the worth of inter-racial co-operation for youth in all areas of art educational effort.
>
> No movement or organization typifies such emphasis more encouragingly than the Karamu House in Cleveland.... In this institution, with its excellent staff of white and colored instructors and its strongly integrated four-arts program, we meet a highly-successful

> experiment in the cultural education of the Negro into which racial differences have not intruded.[32]

Vividly hopeful, this passage communicates the intentness with which Porter advocated "inter-racial co-operation" both as a practical educational measure, or a matter of politics, and as a methodological principle for an understanding of art that works against the closure of history (delicately figured as "race-feeling" and "race-culture").[33]

The second statement by Porter does similar work, if in a way that reflects his commitment, in this text, to historical form. A mere footnote, it nevertheless gives what is perhaps *Modern Negro Art*'s strongest statement on the concept of "racial art," then being marshaled for the first time by white writers despite having, by 1943, circulated among black commentators for nearly four decades. Here Porter follows up on a discussion of the work of Archibald J. Motley (1891–1981):

> Motley's paintings have been pointed out by several white writers as exemplary instances of racial art. Admitting his approach to Negro subject matter to be original, though over exuberant, the present writer cannot tell whether these commentators mean an essentially racial psychology, or the mere predominance of the Negro subject. (MNA, 172, n. 4)

Porter claims an ambivalence which hardly conceals the fact that he is unequivocally against the idea of racial art. He leaves no doubt about how easily the "over[ly] exuberant" "predominance of the Negro subject" gives way to the misapprehension of an "essentially racial psychology." But, importantly, what Porter "cannot tell" has as much to do with what Motley's commentators mean by racial art. Porter's cool response to Motley merely provides an occasion to offer his reservations about a

dominant fashion in prewar art discourse (and perhaps about the very idea of cultural exemplarity).

There runs throughout Porter's book a strenuous effort to complicate the perception of like motivation among black artists and those who took them seriously. But even Porter's attention to the issue could not diminish the influence of cultural consensus upon his framing of the context for *Modern Negro Art*. This is what he wrote when faced with the task of situating *Modern Negro Art* in art history: "I have attempted to place Negro art in proper relation to those general trends, events, and periods from the mid-Eighteenth Century to our day, through which it is possible to obtain an integrated view of American cultural history" (MNA, xvii). Porter's formulation understands a "proper relation" to exist between Negro art and the general history of then-contemporary art, but this is no retreat from the brazenly progressive content and cadence of *Modern Negro Art*. It simply registers the deep impress upon Porter's text of the conventional wisdom about black art as belonging to a space of its own. In this way, *Modern Negro Art*'s inaugural uneasiness shows the power of a long-standing desire for a representative black pictorial culture, even over projects committed to answering the call of representation differently. Throughout the book, Porter attempts to resolve the tension between a view of the distinctness of his subject and a conviction to portray it in its imbrication with a broader national culture (and as something greatly more embedded than an expression of "the conscience of the nation"). In one vitally important way, this tension brilliantly serves Porter as a way *not* to produce the authoritative last word on his subjects, but to reposition them precisely as problems of history, method, and of perception itself. But what can account for the anxiety that lay at the foundation of Porter's project?

As Kobena Mercer has pointed out, the problem of black representation has long entailed simultaneous negotiation of issues of depiction

(how to give form to identity?) and delegation (how best to manifest presence in a context committed to denying it?). As Porter's work reminds us, in the United States many black political discourses centering on the question of integration versus segregation have instrumentalized notions of representative culture as central components. The rhetoric of black culture began being forged in consensus-building projects dating from the first decade of the twentieth century. The most durable and well known of these grew out of W. E. B. Du Bois's row with Booker T. Washington, whose "program of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights" Du Bois fiercely opposed.[34] In 1909, Du Bois established the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) partly to combat Washington's program. Indeed, it seems that the first public appearances of work by black artists *as black art* were orchestrated under these auspices. I want to view these and related subsequent developments in terms of their relation to what literary historian Sacvan Bercovitch describes as the emotional, imaginative, and conceptual allure of cultural consensus—and its dialectical twin, the fear of dissension—which have animated rhetoric about American cultural life since Puritanism.[35] The anxiety not simply to achieve consensus but to regard it as an article of faith, even a criterion for the nation's survival, is symptomatized in countless of America's official and unofficial narratives. Bercovitch observes that, summarily,

> It was a rhetoric which . . . recast self-interest, as individualism, into a concept of self-fulfillment that allowed for mutuality and community; which invested the dream of progress with a moral as well as material imperative (or better, perhaps, which invested those moral imperatives with the concern for material improvement);

which in either case translated the spirit of expansion into a vision of growth, experimentation, and constant renewal.[36]

The grandest of these narratives, Bercovitch shows, did important cultural work by blocking America's view of its own inventedness. So when the shrewdest observers of national culture "plumbed the . . . ground of the rhetoric [of the American way]," they saw that "in principle no less than in practice the American way was neither providential nor natural but one of many possible forms of society."[37] In its determination to manage the divisive texture of American culture, rather than be modified by it, the rhetoric of consensus tactically reproduced cultural and social limits. Because it appears to make room for everybody, consensus's indifference to difference in fact reserves a special place for it, eliding difference in the social terrain and thus constituting dissent as enemy to harmony.

And, of course, the exigencies of legal disenfranchisement made the stakes of consensus particularly high for black citizens. Many late-nineteenth-century debates took place among the most prominent black public intellectuals—including Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummell, Martin R. Delany, Frederick Douglass, Henry M. Turner, Booker T. Washington, and George Washington Williams—over "best courses of action" for black Americans and the implications of representativeness itself. In most of these discussions, practical matters of situation (the main lines of questioning asked whether blacks should dig in and fight for the rights and entitlements of full American citizenship, nationalize, or emigrate to territories like Liberia) took precedence over the weighing of virtues among expressive outlets. Yet these early "cultural leaders"[38]—each was renowned as a gifted orator and "man of superior talents and qualities"—marked the main lines of debate around the means of

freed blacks' search for what Paul Gilroy has aptly called "roots and rootedness."[39] They have since also exerted tremendous influence upon what *counts* as viable politics for large numbers of black people, particularly by grounding a politics of personality that reinforces an implicitly circumscribed right to dissent or to political independence, and a corresponding desire to sustain for oneself the support of the group as a whole.

I have mentioned these figures because the antagonisms they embody typically disappear in accounts of the opening moments of the twentieth century, when the rise of urbanization and black middle-class formation in the United States gave discussions of black culture cause to gather around certain sites, such as Harlem, and superrepresentative figures like Du Bois. Importantly, as soon as it became possible to identify black cultural centers and "spokespersons," the issue of "proper contents" for black culture gained considerable force from the powerful underwriting of place and personage—forms whose apparent unity enhances the impression of consensus.[40] From the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, art, artists, and directives concerning their public functions all played active roles in enfranchisement initiatives. Where uplift was concerned, Du Bois, writing in 1905, considered the "essential thing" to be "like-mindedness—Agreement in the object to be worked for, or in other words, *definiteness of aim*."[41] Positive representations of black life provided real means of advancement, showing that "Negroes are a nation . . . stored with wonderful possibilities of culture."[42] But Du Bois was not one to obsess himself with appeals to those who would deny such potential. At the very least, such images affirmed that "our one haven of refuge is ourselves [and that] [t]here is no power under God's high heaven that can stop the advance of eight thousand thousand honest, earnest, inspired and united people."[43] Promoting the natural good of idealized representations of black life was paramount in this project: authentically racial culture needed evidently racial art.

According to the leading version of the story of black art in the United States, many people intuited this connection. Porter's *Modern Negro Art* accounts for this new conviction in terms of its manifest improvement of Negroes' lives. A chapter titled "At the Turn of the Century" examines the birth of a market for black artists' work, positioning this event as proof that one did not have to be a creator or public figure in order to contribute something meaningful to the cultural "reawakening" taking place at this time (MNA, 71–85). Porter exhorted his 1943 reader that exhibiting, owning, and knowing this art were all gestures within a repertoire of self-preservation through which black Americans could serve themselves by consuming black culture. This activity had the added benefit of demonstrating that blacks possessed quintessentially modern American virtues—freedom, faith, invention, and entrepreneurship. Yet it comes to view in a striking way in Porter's text. After several chapters chronicling the "nurturing of Negro talent" (by such bodies as the Anti-Slavery Society and the Freedman's Aid Society) and the development of a bona fide educational system for black artists, Porter creates a special forum in which to spotlight the Du Bois effect. Porter writes that after a period that saw "the diminution of national interest in Negro cultural advancement as a result of Booker T. Washington's industrial education program," "The American Negro about 1900 began to evince greater interest in his cultural opportunities. With the new century his hopes rose for increased advantages in the land of his birth. Maneuvering through educational and religious channels, his leaders sought encouragement and support for him" (MNA, 76, 66). Such linkages of "the Negro's interest" with the dictates of cultural authority recur throughout Porter's text. In another instance, he suggests that the "maturity of consciousness of Negro art and literature almost dates from [William Dean] Howells' article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900" (MNA, 73). The portion of the article that Porter cites condemns

Charles W. Chestnutt for not being "willing to own his color" in stories and novels exploring miscegenation and the vicissitudes mixed-race identity (an interesting charge given that Chestnutt's very problematic in this work is color's peculiar instability in such contexts). Porter's implicit endorsement of Howells's view strangely contradicts the integrationist thrust of his survey.

Indeed Porter positions Du Bois and his writing as prime catalysts of this consciousness-raising process, proudly noting that "a revival of art and literature" ranked second in the itemized program for black uplift that Du Bois published in *The Crisis* in 1915 (MNA, 171).[11] While Porter concedes that "it cannot be shown that this appeal evoked any direct response on the part of the American Negro," his high regard for Du Bois's brand of representativeness prompts the avowal, in the very next line: "It is significant that almost from this date forward, the Negro of all classes demonstrated a more progressive attitude toward general social problems as well as toward such special phases of the cultural life as art and literature" (MNA, 171). Correspondingly, after describing the decade from 1900 to 1910 as "not a period of supreme achievement or material prosperity for the artist," Porter pictures the next in terms of which the "new spokesmen" would very much approve:

> The artistic regeneration of the Negro began in the second decade of the Twentieth Century. After a long period of intermittent success, Negro genius found a more promising outlook for creative activity in the years following the First World War. This new orientation was in part the result of the artists themselves, but in a broader sense it was the articulation of the yearnings, beliefs, and attitudes of the Negro masses by their new spokesmen. (MNA, 86)

Notice where the stress falls here, for the relationship it establishes between artists (and their work) and the will of the masses continues to

structure typical modes of presenting and understanding the former's work. For Porter, the most consequential of these figures could also be seen as disseminators of black intellectual culture: Du Bois, who founded *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* in 1910 and edited it until 1934; the sociologist and educator Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity;* and Alain Locke, who contributed to the progressive journal *Survey Graphic: Magazine of Social Interpretation.* These men introduced the artists who would come to personify the Harlem Renaissance as "serious artists and as the awaited interpreters of the modern Negro" (MNA, 88). If at this time what art and artists could be asked to do was paramount, similarly important was the spokesperson's advice concerning what and how art might be taken up. Porter in fact depicts the spokesperson's censorial power as broad enough to adjudicate not only the relationship between artists and audiences but the one between the historical text and its reader, as well: "If further evidence of the general poverty of Negro artists of the time [1900–1910] were needed, it might be found in the writings of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, who [in 1920] published a scathing rebuke to the Negro public for its neglect of Richard Lonsdale Brown and May Howard Jackson" (MNA, 171).

In the 1920s, this new order cemented somewhat in highly influential, and very different, writings by Locke and Du Bois.[47] The efforts of both typify early attempts by then self-conscious representatives to devise and promulgate a set of distinct, recognizable, and common aesthetic imperatives. Chief among these (for a time) was a way to satisfy what Locke, a widely renowned philosopher and intellectual activist, sweepingly called "the natural ambition of Negro artists for a racial idiom in their art expression."[48] But the two did not agree on how to go about this. Unlike Du Bois, Locke was a committed aesthetician who published his more localized views on Negro art in several places. In an essay titled "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," Locke's chief contribution to his collection *The New Negro,* Locke sought to place the formal

precepts of African art at the center of "Negro American" art practice, in an effort to engender a racial idiom. Making reference to the work of white painters such as Derain, Matisse, Picasso, Elaine Stern, and Franz Marc, all of whom had sourced African art forms, Locke identified materials and concepts that, he argues, were the Negro artist's to reclaim by "deep-seated aesthetic endowment." Locke worried that "the conventional blindness of the Caucasian eye with respect to the racial material at [its] disposal" would transfer wholesale to black artists, and condemned any "expression which [is] imitative and not highly original, and [a] racial expression which [is] only experimental."[47]

A year after *The New Negro* appeared in 1925, Du Bois published his oft-cited "Criteria of Negro Art," which was in fact the first volley in a five-year effort to regain control of an aesthetics debate that he had initiated, but which the overwhelming success of Locke's volume had redirected. "Criteria" and Du Bois's other consequential essays on art, including 1921's "Negro Art," were published in *The Crisis*.[48] This monthly journal, which Du Bois edited from 1915 to 1934, acted as the prime intellectual vehicle for the NAACP and featured a work of art on every cover starting in 1915. Du Bois's two essays contain some of his most notorious statements about black representation. In "Negro Art" he had already declared, "We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one."[49] "Criteria of Negro Art" followed the return of some disappointing answers to a questionnaire Du Bois had printed in the February 1926 issue of *The Crisis*.[50] In this essay, Du Bois makes what Arnold Rampersad considers "his clearest declaration" on the subject of black art.[51] "All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists," Du Bois avers there. "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda."[52] Although some suggest that Du Bois complemented these positions in public with a consensus-friendly po-

sition on the art of the "Harlem Renaissance" that differed strongly from the one he shared with confidantes,[53] he condemned the "decadence" of Locke's program openly.[54] For Du Bois, Negro art's purpose was to radiate beauty, goodness, and truth, and to capture a "racially dark" vision of things: "Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way white Americans can not."[55] At any rate, "heroism in the face of enslavement was truth and beauty at the same time" for Du Bois, and "the artist served both ideals simultaneously in recording the acts of courage."[56]

This rhetoric bears fairly clear signs of its having been customized for a biracial public as part of a larger program of image management. It functioned didactically, supplying tools for thinking in the most general terms about what it is that a "true" black artist is up to culturally. One without access to these figures' subtler articulations of black aesthetic specificity could hardly be blamed for expecting "Negro art" to materialize, in fine, that "racially dark vision," the prewar ancestor of the "black perspective" summoned from today's cultural worker. Yet what unites these seminal 1920s tracts across their emphatically different concerns, and secures their legacy today through a range of subsequently formal practices, is a tendency to assign role and rule to black artists, whether or not they adopt a stentorian tone to do so. Both Du Bois and Locke articulated the black artist as a figure naturally continuous not only with the struggle but with the destiny of black America. Du Bois gave this particularly stark expression in 1925 when, in an otherwise mildly toned contribution to the radical journal *Modern Quarterly*, he concluded that "if the drama of the transportation of millions... to the United States and their emancipation could have been accomplished without a gift of emotion and beauty to the world, it would have been an eternal proof that the Negro was different from

other human beings."[57] Yet for Du Bois, Negro art demanded more than the commitment of certain individuals; it required a mysterious, seemingly innate admixture in which "individual impulse [is] combined with a certain group compulsion . . . meaning that the wishes, thoughts and experiences of thousands of individuals influence consciously and unconsciously the message of the one who speaks for all."[58] In time, Du Bois predicted, a "studied and purposeful restraint is giving to change [the artist's] method of art expression," but he was confident that "the grim truth . . . will not for generations permit the mere stylist and dilettante."[59] It would only exaggerate the point slightly to suggest that Du Bois imagined a Negro art nearly devoid of invention, or of open speculation into the terms of one's relationship to the group or to Negro artistry as a practice. Moreover, Du Bois articulates, as one aspect of "group compulsion," a directive to the audience for Negro art, according to which experimentation or naive engagement with "the grim truth" will not be countenanced by the discerning. Lest we be tempted to dismiss Du Bois's rhetoric (or my reading of it) as overblown, Porter's *Modern Negro Art* reminds us that a ready audience awaited these essays, and that they appeared just in time for the "awakening" of younger artists around 1924: "At last America was becoming conscious of the collective strength of Negro art, and at last there was rising a Negro middle class which increasingly was to require the services of the artist" (MNA, 85).

And in a very real sense, *Modern Negro Art* provided that service. At least upon its 1943 publication it was said to do so in the pages of some of the most widely read black newspapers and periodicals. The book received especially vigorous promotion in the *Chicago Defender*, including two mentions in the year of its release. The first fell during the Christmas shopping season, fortuitously enough, when Langston

Hughes heralded it as a "delightful present at yuletide" in his popular syndicated column, "Here to Yonder."[60] The second occurred in the political commentary portion of Charley Cherokee's "National Grapevine" (also syndicated). In a telling reflection of the book's growing popularity in some circles, Cherokee knowingly informed the reader that "your library is incomplete without a copy."[61]

In this chapter I am concerned with the historical contents of certain contemporary constraints on artistic freedom. While seeking to grasp the importance of the prewar-period activities for artists born well after them, we cannot downplay the important relationship of affinity, if not interdependence, between the burgeoning ideology of black art, the rise of the market for it, and the numerous appeals for *generational* identification with the priorities of black culture trumpeted by a few exceptionally brilliant, persuasive, and well-positioned individuals. Arthur Schomburg's statement that "[h]istory must restore what slavery took away, for it is *the social damage of slavery* that the present generation must repair and offset" had for many exemplified the Harlem Renaissance's attitude toward the past.[62] But despite the historicist language of rebirth assigned the work of the period, the audience for which it existed was entirely new, and embodied by Porter's "rising middle class." It wouldn't take long, then, for the expectation that all black artists work in answer to "restorative urges" to become a barrier to a truly creative engagement with the difficulties of black positioning in relation to innovation in art practice. By the 1960s, what Locke had decried as the "timid conventionalism which racial disparagement has forced upon the Negro mind"[63] seemed to have been supplemented, for artists, by the

palpable impact of a conventionalism imposed from within the culture. The tenor of many black artists' conversations reflected an anxiety about achieving broad social relevance from within a situation—actual or perceived—restricting them to a spectrum of sanctioned postures toward image-making. An earlier belief that "all valuable exploration of Negro life results in the discovery of 'real' types" (MNA, 103) had transformed into an obligation for artists who desired access to the small but significant black audiences as well as to wider ones.

The issue was particularly acute for black artists in America who didn't wish "to pander to an interest in things Negroid," as Hale Woodruff put it in 1966, and who naturally wanted their work to be seen against the fullness of its formative backdrop.[64] In fact a pitched battle over what would count as "black art" awaited many who were born around the time of the Harlem Renaissance and who came to maturity as artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Integration versus segregation remained a central methodological question, but now the same vocabulary brought the politics of black artists' practice into direct dialogue with high-profile, frontline Civil Rights movement activities and separatist-nationalist countermovements. The painter Romare Bearden convened Spiral, an artists' collective, in 1963 in the hope of discovering through it a way to articulate the Negro artist's relation to these developments. Growing out of a meeting between Bearden, Woodruff, and A. Philip Randolph (who initiated it), Spiral lasted two years and mounted one exhibition, in 1965 at Long Island University.[65] As the group's name foretells and as a 1966 interview annotated by Jeanne Siegel for *Art News* demonstrates, Spiral's deliberations resulted, fascinatingly, in a continual refinement of the question, Why Spiral? but not an answer. The members' divergent responses to the question are at times familiar:

JAMES YEARGANS We should look to our past for a distinct identity. The Negro artist should take something out of the present upheaval as part of his expression. The Negro has a deep cultural heritage to be explored.

But witness Charles Alston's response to Yeargans, which theoretically marks the artist's location within a structure of obligation that constricts "personality":

CHARLES ALSTON I have come to the point where I wonder whether most of the expression I observe in Negro painting might not be only reflections of a dominant culture and not truly indigenous. The Negro artist might have a more personal "thumbprint."

In the context we have thus far dwelled in, several of the Spiral artists' statements constitute interpretations informed by a consciousness of the role of aesthetics in the construction of damaging social images, as well as by a prioritization of integration as praxis:

FELRATH HINES There is no Negro image in the twentieth century—in the 1960s. There are only prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world, to which the Negro has been, and is, contributing.

NORMAN LEWIS I feel that Franz Kline in his paintings with large contrasts of black against white and Ad Reinhardt in his all-black painting might represent something more Negroid than work done by Negro painters.

PERRY FERGUSON I suggest that there is no such thing in America as Negro art. . . .

EMMA AMOS We never let white folks in. I don't believe there is such a thing as a Negro artist. Why don't we let white folks in?

ALVIN HOLLINGSWORTH We blackballed all the Colored [sic] folks, too.[66]

The members of Spiral critically take on the "Negro image," the symbology of material blackness, and the cultural politics of "Negro art." In doing so, the only "group compulsion" they exhibit is toward a conception of art as a domain where fixed values and closed politics can be decentered and opened. Perhaps most importantly, they position the artist as a manipulator, not a bearer, of cultural meaning. Thus in Norman Lewis's art history, Reinhardt is as "black" as Lewis himself and Kline as "racial" as anything Locke might have hoped for. (Would that Lewis had written it.) Equally important for our purpose, though, is the fact that the hegemony in question is a black one, which redirects the erasures of difference that have long characterized certain strategies of antiblack racism: now the difference in question is interracial, originating in the very conflicts that make the politics of representation an important and interesting site to *work* through one's practice. Of course it is in the very nature of this work that new signs will emerge from the *incorporation* of differences, such as those figured above by "prevailing ideas," Kline and Reinhardt, even "colored folks" and the philosophical difference of *opinion* stating, as Ferguson does, "that there is no such thing in America as Negro art." But only by their apprehension as incorporations can such signs serve as proof of a difference already present within the discourse of black art, albeit as an abiding falsehood.[67]

I have dwelled on this delightfully vexing, small portrayal of the state of black art in 1966 for two reasons. First, it may explain why art histories of the period pay so little attention to Spiral: it requires an utterly restless, terminally open picture of an idiom long prized for its

availability to certain knowledge, internal consistency, and obedient attachment to its own principles of intelligibility. And I believe this openness needs safeguarding for a whole host of reasons. The other purpose of dwelling on Spiral's "inevitable" enunciatory dynamics is to dramatize the manner in which these varying inflections had to be policed into a nonexistent unanimity for the purposes of public presentation. Listen to the way that, rhetorically, Siegel brings Spiral's members together, so as to bring their deliberations to a point:

> In spite of their doubts and different opinions, they still hoped to evoke in their paintings the "signature," the personal "thumbprint" that they had talked so much about.... In a concerted effort to bring out this "Negro-ness" they tried to eliminate western ideas from their minds.... The lack of a quick and ready thematic solution to their dilemma was, I believe, a disappointment to them.[68]

However unwittingly, this containment strategy robs the "dilemma" of all contemporaneity, as if to render it familiar precisely as a way to neutralize the threat of categorical upheaval. To consider Spiral's exchange *apart* from this pat (though hardly neutral) conclusion is to hear the members avow the provisionality of their occupation's signs (Negro, art, and practice) and thereby to articulate the attendant identities (chiefly, black artist and black art) as sites of contest and revision which are constituted through ultimately arbitrary exclusions. By reconfiguring the image of the Negro artist in terms of her incorporations, they compel a consideration of a Negro art that not only outstrips its own boundaries, but takes on a future set of significations that those of us who speak of "black art" now may not be able to foresee.[69]

An unpredictable future of black signifiers, however, was precisely what other visible factions of black aestheticians wished most to avoid.

And not incidentally, those proponents of Black Arts and Black Aesthetics who dictated "ethnic consciousness" to black artists grounded much of their praxis in a fierce resistance to integration.[70] This development is especially ironic given the fact that, as Mercer reminds us,

> In its highly didactic tone, the essentialist discourse of the black cultural nationalists was compulsively repeating the three prescriptive pressures Bearden had pinpointed in 1946, namely that black artists "should continue the traditions of African art... should attempt a unique, nationalistic, social expression... should [provide] a trenchant reflection of [their] social aspirations."[71]

Under stern leadership that rejected the tenets of the Civil Rights movement with passionate arguments in favor of isolation, the Black Aesthetics and the Black Arts movements extended sharp views on the black artist's responsibility to black culture, encouraging artists to make "their own" history, for instance, by adapting African forms with special attention to the accurate rendering of black physiognomy.[72] As Werner Sollors observes in a discussion of the nationalistic development in the work of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, when black cultural nationalists advocated racial violence it was often in the course of formulating answers to artistic dilemmas thought to derive precisely from their location in a white culture. Baraka, Sollors writes, "tried to escape what he felt was a neutralization and absorption process by speaking to Black people."[73] Such an evacuation could affirm the "integral relationship between black art and black people," precisely by eviscerating any "white" content.[74] It also permitted its proponents to cast artists who *did* consult nonindigenous forms as race-traitors, and to find in their work convenient warnings against the evils of losing one's cultural bearing. Such work was structurally if not politically assimilationist, and those such

as the poet Don L. Lee had a very specific way of thinking about what it means to integrate: "I seek the integration of Negroes with black people."[75] For Lee, there was no question of renegotiating a "mixed" pool of resources en route to the creative act: "Black art is created from black forces that live within the body.... Black art will elevate and enlighten our people and lead them toward an awareness of self, i.e., their blackness. It will show them mirrors... Black art is a reciprocal art."[76] To this end, Black Aesthetics discouraged black artists' unrestricted play among the resources available and referred them instead to a limited range of forms and tropes that could yield an unequivocally ethnic art.

For Ralph Ellison—whose *Invisible Man* (1955) was greeted by one prominent black critic as needed by black people "like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the neck,"[77] and whose "black forces" Lee described in 1967 as "lost"[78]—the question of integration was central to the very notion of artistic practice. It was therefore a question every black artist in America had to face, since in a balanced practice there is a prioritization of representational desires and interests in which race is but one of several modalities. This, at least is the strong implication of an essay Ellison wrote in 1968 to introduce a small exhibition of Bearden's paintings in Albany, New York.[79] Near the essay's start, Ellison writes:

> Bearden's search for fresh methods to explore the plastic possibilities of Negro American experience... allows him to express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to [modern] art as [an]... agency for confronting and revealing the world.... It is also to have had a most successful encounter with a troublesome social anachronism which, while finding its existence in areas lying beyond the special province of the artist, has nevertheless caused great confusion among many painters of his social background. I say *social*, for although Bearden

> is by self-affirmation no less than by public definition a Negro American, the quality of his *artistic* culture can by no means be conveyed by that term. Nor does it help to apply the designation "black." . . .
>
> What, then, do I mean by anachronism? I refer to that imbalance in American society which leads to a distorted perception of social reality, to a stubborn blindness to the creative possibilities of cultural diversity, to the prevalence of negative myths, racial stereotypes, and dangerous illusions about art, humanity, and society. Arising from the failure of social justice, this anachronism divides social groups along lines that are no longer tenable.[80]

To judge from the way the essay proceeds, Ellison regarded Bearden's invitation to write as more than an opportunity to pursue a recreational interest in visual art or to do a favor for an old friend.[81] It also allowed Ellison to raise some questions that Spiral had occasioned but that had not been raised in reports on the group's activities. Specifically, Ellison wants to know: Where did their belief originate that they, as artists, had to mount a special response to the Civil Rights struggles under way? What prior authorizations of the "black artist" *as a function of obligation* did these artists' supposed quandary depend on? As the present discussion has sought to show, the historical arc of these questions reaches well before 1965, the year Black Arts claims for its birth. Doubtless, as Mercer reminds us, "Ellison was implicitly writing against the grain" of the voices of Black Arts leaders, whose advance reached its apogee in 1968.[82] But Ellison's appeal must also be viewed in the fullness of the context that made a war of positions necessary in the first place. Here Ellison, who frequently maintained separate realms for art and politics, appears to have accepted the consequences of their mutual dependence; he implements the figure of the universalist artist strategically, that is, to op-

pose the "Negro artist's" conscription by *any* politics of representation that would decide the course of one's history and production. That model, Ellison's *Invisible Man* had earlier suggested, bound the imagination to the constant refurbishment of a fixed and exemplary ego-ideal, and ran counter to the imagining of alternatives that art, for some, exists to serve. Ellison's resistance to the black artist's instrumentalization was a key element of his determination to Americanize "black art" more fully. Integration, he seemed to insist, was a necessary component of any Americanism worthy of the name.[83]

Even if the exigencies of ethnic formalism helped to shape Ellison's argument, "The Art of Romare Bearden" leaves that terrain and pushes the question further. It comes very close, in fact, to the central question of this book: How will the question and its answers change when, *not if*, we shift our orientation and understanding away from the black artist's presumed, peculiar representational duties, and toward the other possibilities and practices of representation and affiliation that much creative practice seeks to bring nearer to us? The essay registers with particular force the weight of Ellison's stresses on *the place from which we apprehend the black artist's work* on the kinds of previously proffered or obtained knowledge that condition our expectations in that place. This is especially so in the case of Ellison's characterization of the "anachronistic" but still common will to regard the "qualities of [an artist's] *artistic* culture" as accurately determinable from her "social background" or "public definition."[84] Ellison calls this a "stubborn blindness," even as it describes a cross-cultural practice that comes easily to view in those countless records of critical and historical reception documenting casual and authoritative encounters with black artists' work.[85]

Nothing less than a practice of integration, reconceived as an interpretive critical practice, became central to the task of reversing this blindness. This entailed recourse to a longer, deeper sort of looking, one

attuned to the differences *among* the materials of which the work is seen to consist, the gestures by which it is seen to reveal itself, and the meanings these are seen to convey. For Ellison, the combinatory quality of Bearden's pictures specifically necessitated this adjustment in practice. Bearden's art captured and made representable the tremendous force of integration, drawing and freely improvising upon his "artistic culture" in all its heterogeneity. Bearden's Harlem projections, Ellison observes, grew out of exercises in spatial recession characteristic of earlier paintings developed during Bearden's study of early masters like Giotto and Pieter de Hooch.[56] Now, Ellison saw an almost frenetic surface tension in Bearden's compositional idiom. This, combined with Bearden's incorporation of commonplace materials, made his subject as insistently contemporary as that of his present-day interlocutors, who included Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. In Bearden's method, Ellison detected an artistic mobility and political optimism consonant with his own. Accordingly, Ellison's essay helps orient us to the pictures' quality as "tissues of quotations"[57] and, by extension, to the ethics implied by Bearden's unrestricted meandering in the field of his sources. Ellison emphasizes that meandering because it shows, in microcosm, the contradictions of sensibility and approach that define relations among black artists and black subject matter precisely by *not* defining them in advance. Tending to the breadth of resources for Bearden's art thus meant not only identifying and lingering on the implications of the work's most disparate aspects. It meant permitting such differences to engender a crisis of definition if need be.

Ellison's recognition that Bearden's art worked itself out in excess of a racial culture—and that his negotiation of an artistic terrain was simultaneous with, and inseparable from, his negotiation of the social—honors the driving ambition of Porter's *Modern Negro Art*.[58] There, Porter had interpolated into the aesthetic and art historical realms

under the guidepost of "eclecticism." He marshaled integration with special vigor in lengthy passages on the work of Woodruff and Henry Ossawa Tanner, which he viewed as emblematic of innovative assimilation.[89] In attempting at moments like these to foreground problems native to art, Porter marked out a pro-integrationist stance about as forcefully as his framework (the art historical survey) and his context (the close of the Harlem Renaissance brought about, in part, by the beginnings of U.S. involvement in World War II) would allow. He makes his most forceful political statements by way of citation, but always definitively. At one point, he invokes the comment by the venerable sociologist E. Franklin Frazier on James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones:* "Whatever racial temperament there is in these poems has been made articulate through cultural forms which were acquired by the artist in America."[90] Porter then remarks correctively, and with an eye to the bigger picture, "We quote these opinions so as to leave no doubt as to the tangible issues involved in this renascence of the Negro spirit."[91]

If in some ways Porter anticipates the position Ellison stakes in his discussion of Bearden's work, in others he does not. As Porter stages it, the task of the survey, and by extension of cultural history, is not to take on but to report the difficulties raised by the question of integration. Thus the "utopian summons to social transformation"[92] that Porter so admired in the experimental educational work of Karamu House in Cleveland remains distant from his text. The work of *Modern Negro Art* is, clearly, not to evacuate black representational space or to render it as merely coincident with the larger civic and aesthetic terrain that ghettoizes it (as if to ask, "Why all the fuss?"). Rather, it identifies the mode and even some of the terms of Negro art's attachment to, and thereby underlines its presence within, a context that also formed a crucial part of its own. Yet in writing his findings, Porter winds up with two stories to tell, whose subjects append but do not penetrate one another. In this

way, *Modern Negro Art* reinstates a basic difference between what is possible in the spaces of representation and what is possible in the world as such. By contrast, when Ellison speaks of the "troublesome social anachronism," he does so precisely to capitalize on the potential of art's fundamental interculturalism, the utopian promise of a kind of freedom secured through art's ineradicable sociality, or worldliness. The anachronism, Ellison writes, "has had the damaging effect of alienating [the understanding of] many Negro artists from the traditions, techniques, and theories *indigenous to the arts* through which they aspire to achieve themselves."[53]

Yet Porter's and Ellisons' texts, so different in kind and ambition, agree profoundly in their desire for genuinely contextual treatment of black artists' work. Ellison's solution may be invaluable, however, for foregrounding the utility of art to offer means of experimentation with, rather than a realization of, historical subjectivity. Ellison's account remains indispensable precisely for the stress it places on the double-sidedness of the subjectivity effects to which it responds—that is, on the determined and determining relationship of works and viewers to the social idioms that would arbitrate their intercourse. It is Ellison's specific commitment to the ability of some art to "teach us the ambiguity of vision" that ensures its relevance for any effort to keep cultural politics open.[54]

2
A New Context for Reconstruction
Some Crises of Landscape in Kara Walker's Silhouette Installations

What may be of sharpest critical interest about the legacy of the genre of landscape . . . is the precedents that the genre provides for a continued engagement, in the context of the visible, with that which is contingently excluded from the possibility of being seen and represented.
Charles Harrison, "The Effect of Landscape"

A nearby label reads "Kara Walker, American, b. 1969. The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven, 1995. Cut paper and adhesive on wall" (fig. 2.1). Stepping back to consider again the silhouetted scene, reading from left to right, we are met with several challenges, one after another. We see a young woman with stereotypically black facial features, seated with her back against a tree and legs raised onto the shoulders of a younger white boy who dangles a toy sword in front of her vagina, while being egged on by a female playmate. Nearby, three women dressed in domestic workers' garb form a chain of suckling, mouths to breasts, as if to mimic the action of the baby resting on one of

2.1 Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 15 × 35 ft. Deitch Projects, New York. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co. ALSO PLATE 1.

their laps. These women appear to be unaware of the events surrounding them, so engaged are they with one another. Elsewhere, without necessary connection to the preceding, a newborn emerges from a man's anus, just to the right of a one-legged man—with a little girl's body inserted partway into his own anus—who leans on a sword upon which a small child has been impaled. The only solitary figure in the scene is an impish baby whose placement separates the above scenarios from a central event. Traipsing before us, the baby leaves his mark in mounds of shit that draw an arc around a three-figure grouping, thus demarcating its place as a plinth does a monument's. This group comprises a menacing girl who wields an axe, backward, over the head of a small child with a pronouncedly "Negroid" physiognomy, while behind her an adolescent figure aims a huge splinter at her buttocks.

Just as each of the preceding statements could describe Walker's installation, so could these: a young black slave girl is subjected to a violent molestation by white children; several black women—and a baby—are depicted in a degrading *ménage à quatre;* there is "a trail of mounds of excrement emanating from the rear end of a black child";[1] black children are sexually and physically abused throughout this image. Worse, it all takes place in the dominant shadow of the axe-wielding girl, whose centrality, size, and location mark her as Eva, the angelic, white child-heroine of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel of 1852. Until her death at the end of Stowe's novel, Eva is the confidante of the title character, Uncle Tom, the archetypal American figure of black complicity with white racism. The clusters of trees, ground, and miniature Georgian houses floating just above the figures' heads assure us that these events are occurring in a "plantation setting."[2] There can be no doubt that this is a work of art about slavery.

With these competing descriptions of just one of the tableaux Walker has created since 1994, I want to evoke a tension that runs un-

resolved throughout these defining works in Walker's oeuvre, even as the strong opinions the work generates tend to resolve it. The tension itself comprises a laundry list of dynamic oppositional entanglements, between black and white, obviously; but also between violence and pleasure, death and birth, orality and anality, documentation and fantasy, art and nonart, seeing and imagining, and so on. If the differences between these accounts reflect, crudely, the range of outlooks on and investments in the far-from-apparent content of Walker's work, they also tell of their incompleteness as accounts. In this discussion I want to reattach these issues of outlook and investment to the scenographic elements that make Walker's work in this mode ("cut paper and adhesive on wall") distinctive and important, and to the very peculiar sort of viewing experience this work can generate. I want to show that the difference between these accounts is in a sense no difference at all, inasmuch as neither of them reflects an alert reckoning with a viewer's actual situation amidst Walker's work.

When one approaches a work like *The End of Uncle Tom*, it doesn't take much to figure out that the artist's process is as simple as it appears: divine, draw, cut, plan, and stick. Moreover, since Walker is a prodigiously talented draftswoman, her work with the Exacto knife produces forms of astonishing graphic specificity. Yet, aside from the word or two we can put to the race, sex, age, prototype, social function, or symbology of any given element, everything that falls within the borders of this confabulation of silhouetted people, places, and things remains suspended somewhere between generated and projected meanings. Rather than displaying a finely wrought and reproducible message, these tableaux find their meaningful purpose in the very situations where viewers attempt to reckon with them and put them to use. We might say that the meaning most intrinsic to them is that they have been imagined and displayed at all.

A further proof of their terminal structural openness is the fact that we experience these works as a deeply unsatisfying series of seductions. Just as surely as the figures appear familiar, the tableaux's suggestive titles and evocative associations call to mind novels whose endings we know and films we can recite from memory. But the tableaux themselves fiercely withhold corroborating data, refusing purposefully to yield to recognition or understanding, and compounding an anxiety peculiar to not-knowing. This litany of removes—from slavery, from Stowe, from storytelling, indeed from point itself—declares the tableau's commitment to the place between narrative and the forces that erode it, lodging its subject between distinctness and uncertainty. Therefore, if Walker's tableaux represent slavery, they decidedly do not represent it as an institution and its particular forms—and perhaps not even as a matter we can any longer get right or wrong.

This deeply unsettling claim depends for its efficacy upon one's willingness to recognize that, like all of Walker's tableaux, *The End of Uncle Tom* asks to be experienced as coextensive with the viewer's own space and time. Walker secures this goal by using the wall in its totality and by designing and arranging rudimentary shapes, such as the disks of dung, to establish a ground plane that appears and even feels consistent with the one upon which viewers stand. These devices, while small and terrifically easy to overlook, diminish the wall's role as an incidental pictorial space upon which something hangs for our contemplation. In fact they forcefully deny the wall's containment of the represented event, by extending the space in question both forward and back. The figures' enigmatic encounters occur neither here nor there but in between, both here *and* there. In this way, all the figural identities and "subject matters" in question are quite literally situated as outcomes of a mediation between a desiring onlooker and the available forms. These figures occupy and create space in a way that must be considered on its own terms, es-

pecially if we are to claim that the tableaux somehow have something to say about a subject as difficult as slavery. These are the terms on which I would like to refute the iconographical reading of Walker's tableaux, in favor of an embedded one. In doing so, I privilege a type of reading that sees contemporary approaches to slavery as constituting demands upon slavery, not as a fact but as an aspect of lived history. These demands alter an idea and image of slavery that, as legislated by an unchanging cultural politics of memory, would remain permanently beyond alteration.

Walker's work is generally preoccupied with the problem of present-day testimonial about the past. This focus is ironic, given that her art came to popular notice as the object of a still-unresolved dispute over that very issue. Though little known outside the Western art establishment when Walker received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1997, the *International Review of African-American Art* (IRAAA) in 1998 named her "one of the most outspoken African-Americans in American public life today."[3] This sudden popular fortune was in no small part due to a letter-writing campaign initiated against Walker's work by Betye Saar, the visionary artist known for intricate collages and paintings exploring issues of power, patronage, and the circulation of cultural images. Saar's best-known work, the *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), is an assemblage constructed as a shadow box enshrining three incompatible versions of the caricatured black domestic—the central one sporting a broom under one arm and an automatic rifle under the other—to demonstrate a seizure of control over the stereotype's signification and power. In 1997, after visiting "Upon My Many Masters—An Outline,"[4] an exhibition of Walker's work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Saar mailed letters to some two hundred "writers, artists, and politicians."

The letters included a photocopied reproduction of an installation view of Walker's second major exhibition, featuring *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), and a flyer decrying Walker's work, which interested recipients could post themselves.[5] The letter itself began: "I am writing you, seeking your help, to spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African-American artist, Kara Walker." Saar's text went on to pose a number of leading questions, including, "Are African-Americans being betrayed under the guise of art?" and even figured the work as a direct threat: "These images may be in your city next."[6]

Saar later explained that she was driven to canvass against Walker's work in part by a generational concern: "How do young persons just a few years out of school get a show at a major museum? The whole arts establishment picked their work up and put it at the head of the class. This is a danger, not the artists themselves."[7] But according to the author of the unsigned editorial in the IRAAA in which these comments appeared, the stakes were considerably higher than that: "Saar notices a generational divide which she attributes to older people who 'remember the history of blacks selling others in Africa and the history of the struggle of blacks in the United States.'"[8] Indeed, the opposition to Walker's work mounted in the IRAAA does not reduce to an easy, intergenerational conflict. Elsewhere in the same special issue, the artist and art historian Michael Harris construes the art as an opportunistic and violent form of coercion: "When we become artists who use Pickaninnies as a means to develop notoriety and artistic success, there's no need for a Klan. There's no need for any kind of racist opposition because we are so Stockholmed to the point where we will begin to oppress ourselves if we're not careful. It's rare that we get someone who breaks through who's not talking about, or to, whites."[9]

We cannot, I think, disregard these remarks as so much heated dialogue about deliberately provocative art. Both statements do the rhetorical work of testimony, testifying to reality effects concerning the contemporary vitality of the historical enslavement of black people that do not diminish over time. Saar's comments invoke a memory that she cannot have a special recollection of, as if merely to unveil a fact that proves the sadism of the images. Harris's remarks sponsor this invocation exactly, even if they lie at a longer remove from slavery itself, countersigning Saar's memory claim by giving a public and political life to her private recognition.[10] A critical question lingers, then: To what exactly do these statements testify? For one thing, they testify to specific criteria of permissibility routinely applied to black artists. This matters because the criteria themselves also testify in their own way, by establishing causal links between negative images and certain unspecified, undesirable "outcomes." Although considered abstractly, apart from chance and other kinds of determination, these are necessary for essentialism's coherence. For they constitute the negative to which black representational spaces get counterposed and instrumentalized as positive and necessary. Harris goes so far as to figure this space as allowing (improbably) black artists working in America a kind of success that doesn't involve white people. It's the right of inviolability presumed, by some, to apply to such spaces which makes it possible for Harris to really mean something when he says, "It's rare that we get someone who breaks through who's not talking about, or to, whites." Together, these varied testimonies establish the parameters of a space whose outlines the passages above reinforce with four loaded invocations: first, of the practice of violent antiblack racism (with the mention of the Klan); second, with pointed reference to the sanctity of urban-based communities of black sympathy ("your city"); third, by comparing the work's actual effects to those

of chattel slavery as first perpetrated by black Africans on others of their kind and later by whites in the United States; and fourth, and most extraordinarily, by raising the specter of a living population of black Americans who "remember the history" of that institution—as if that history itself, in the wrong hands, reproduces the institution's horrors. Each of these demarcations promotes an image of the original isolation of black populations, or a negative that the "black community," among other formations like the "family," turn into a positive. The ultimately spatial priorities of this politics are further enhanced by implications strong enough to evoke powerful internal representations of known external threats: white sheets, alien invasion, bondage against one's will, brainwashing. "Disguised as art," the manifold dangers of Walker's work are presumably mollified upon their disclosure by Walker's antagonists. But this disclosing activity has important secondary benefits as well: it supplies the politics of testimony with a whole new set of urgencies, which is the best possible argument for its necessity.

Aspects of this ostensibly antiracist visual politics suggest that it may in fact update, rather than counteract, the visual theory of the colonizer that Fanon elegantly dismantles in *Black Skin, White Masks*. For instance, neither Saar nor Harris can construe the object of metaphorization (Walker's specific deployment of the so-called negative image) as the irruption of "false consciousness" *within* the space of consciousness itself. (Here it is helpful to recall Fanon's crucial discovery that "beneath the corporeal schema I had sketched the historico-racial schema.") Rather, both remark it as the "real thing," an object external to the always-integrated black ego come violently upon it from the outside, or the place of the other, which must be expelled. It is an object whose banishment from their space is central to authentic racial performance. Howardena Pindell's comment that many "African-American artists have referred to this trend as a continuation of the plantation system and mentality,"[11] by nam-

ing this ego ("the plantation mentality"), clarifies the extent to which the motivation behind work like Walker's is perceived to be anachronistic *in itself*, like a fragment of slavery carried over unmodified into the present.

It is important to grasp the testimonial function of this collapsing gesture, since to testify is precisely what the tableaux so vividly decline to do. In order to be communicable, the notion that Walker's work virtually reimplements slavery, or its operative psychologizations, requires a contemporary perceiver who enjoys an unbroken view of the institution and its mechanisms, who can *picture* them. Disregarding for now the weakness of this claim, it bears noting—especially since we are attempting to make historical sense of a serious conversation among committed artists—that this notion harmonizes with the particular viewpoint on the "cultural landscape" long ago entrusted to the representative artist. That this has been a figure of tremendous cultural and art historical value in the U.S. context is more than a coincidence. In a way it makes Saar, Harris, and Pindell—as black Americans happy to avow a custodial obligation to a national visual culture tradition—the ideal adjudicators of Walker's case.

I want to suggest that the tableaux, perhaps unbeknownst to reviewers forced to judge them on the basis of photocopies, do represent a deep interest in the problem of testimony. But they shift the stress of that interest toward that which makes testimony to the past a problem in the present, not a given and certainly not a right of birth. This shift is away from an ethics of use applying to negative images (which will be censorial whether it is pro or con) and toward a consideration of the mediations occurring between historical subjects (like Walker) and historical periods (like the antebellum). By mediations I mean simply the effects of inevitable lapses in time and sense that make then and now so profoundly important to distinguish in this context. There is nothing simple about the effects, however. Rather they comprise an inexhaustible range

of literal and psychic translations—a teeming space of identifications lost and gained, indeed of history reordered—that occur when subjects enter relationships with history. It's this complexity which is lost, or at least collapsed, in the remarks above, perhaps most descriptively when Pindell rouses the image of the continuation of the plantation system and mentality. Such a conjuring suggests that Pindell has a special ability to spot and produce a neutralized (tonic) picture of certain cultural danger. This quality, in turn, grounds her claim to representative viewpoint on a landscape from which Walker's tableaux need to be banished.

As I will detail below, Walker's tableaux, on the other hand, stress mediations in a way that puts them at odds with both standard picturing tropes and representativeness. In all cases they resist the comprehensibility required of these types of historical claims. This identifies them precisely as antitestimonial, or at most as testimonies more to the disintegrating effects of ever greater distance from slavery and its effects. More urgently in need of understanding, I think, is their ability to avow this distance's role in making strange our relations to self and to others as such relations would be *given by history*. Perhaps, as some have suggested, if this strangeness more deeply impresses those of us who are continually conscious of the residua of conditions and relations we never occupied—and of the differences among the *forms* that consciousness will take—it does so by making them more residual, not less. The historian Robert M. Stein has written persuasively in this regard. Of the post-Holocaust inheritance of contemporary Jewish intellectuals, Stein observes: "This is a generation formed by an overwhelming experience, desperately and poignantly their own, [that] they themselves were not present to witness. . . . [H]ence the strong force of the desire for history that would refuse to have annihilated . . . a past reality that enters experience only as already annihilated, an object retrievable only as lost."[12] Walker's tableaux powerfully embody the force Stein places be-

hind "the desire for history." Where he speaks of annihilation vis-à-vis "an object retrievable only as lost," he might as well be describing the rhetorical pictures that Saar et al. projected in cancellation of Walker's tableaux. For their remarks survey a situation in which certain losses are always necessarily recoverable. Yet his reference to "a past reality that enters experience only as already annihilated," as no more than a shadow or copy of a truth one would never dream of denying, inadvertently describes the complexity of a fully considered encounter with Walker's tableaux. Because reckoning with the consequences of this annihilation will always be a personalized affair, criteria concerning how to represent the fruits of that process are inappropriate as frameworks for bringing Walker's or any like project into focus.

This function of Walker's tableaux is rooted, like much of her work, in the complex biographical scheme she has developed to accompany it. Through this scheme and its collaboration with her handiwork, Walker sources materials and points of identification from the past, specifically the antebellum period: the silhouette that then thrived as a recreational craft, the historical romance novel, and, of course, the grandeur of the big picture. However, Walker locates these points of identification not to claim and amalgamate their pasts as "her" own past, but instead to clarify her present through a non-internally consistent body of references, or roots. To speak of "the work itself" therefore is to face the prospect of a multifaceted, speculative analysis which is considerate of the many paths we take on the way to selfhood and representation. As Walker has put it, "I don't totally disagree with Betye Saar, but there are tons of ironies to be mined and waded through in the pursuit of self.... I'm trying to find some possibility for beauty within all this horror.... I'm concerned with telling *my* thing. *A* truth."[13] While it may not be possible to totally cancel psychological treachery, Walker suggests, by analyzing effects of the internalization of limits, that one can locate means

of advance, that is to say terms of livability, in surprising places. In one of her more infamous statements, Walker has gone so far as to say that "Afro-Am or African-American artists are always espousing the horrors of slavery and Gen-Afro Apartheid.... But horrors are always tolerable to repressed individuals to whom they may occur. This allows for a stronger sense of masochism in future generations, makes for riots, very colorful."[14] Here Walker further implies that collapsing past horrors into the present—portraying the new uses to which signs of "horror" are put as but versions of the old uses—requires one to disavow awareness of the historical dynamics of intraracial and interracial relations, and the fact that these relations are precisely what help to determine what kinds of relations to self are available to subjects. But these transformations are critical, for they mark the distance from, and change the object of, slavery itself far more concretely by remaining on the level of the subject, than can an abstraction like "generation."[15] Indeed, the endless reproduction of rhetorics and images about slavery's "direct" impress upon our time, insofar as they minimize or eliminate the inscription of mediation, *will* strengthen masochism, one version of which depends on an attachment to scripted roles and a submission to the restrictions they imply. Inasmuch as representations *are* social relations, direct impress representations thus carry their own kind of danger: of imagining relations basically unmodified.

Walker makes similar points repeatedly in her statements, which Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw has shown to be indispensable for understanding her work.[16] Describing her adoption of the black cut-paper silhouette, Walker referred to it as a kind of "script":

> I've been interested in the way in which black people (or commonly: "African-Americans"), or the way at least I responded to, or ignored, or reaffirmed or reinforced certain stereotypes about myself,

> other blacks, or more interestingly—white people—who retain a sense of white supremacy blithely unaware of the power Black life has over them. The silhouette is the most concise way of summing up a number of interests. [It is a way] to try and uncover the often subtle and uncomfortable ways racism, and racist and sexist stereotypes influence and script our everyday lives.[17]

In the sense Walker gives it, the script functions in two ways simultaneously. For one thing, in the manner of Fanon's "racial-historical schema," the script acts as a set of preexisting impositions upon the black subject's consciousness of possibility. It offers a set of substitute representations of self, seeking to limit that self's possible enunciations and possible understandings according to a racist logic. But the script also provides a key for decoding the black subject from the outside, as against a "generally legible, culturally available formula for black identity."[18] Hence the race-leveling function of the silhouette: "everybody is black" inasmuch as everybody in Walker's tableaux participates in the process of its figuration. The leveling action of the silhouette freezes all of her figures not in racial blackness but in a detour through the various forms of epidermalization (racializing or not) that abstract identities from bodies and individuals, as well as individuals from selves (the former being the social embodiment of the latter). Whereas in its prior, late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life as a private image, the silhouette gave presence to that which maturity or death had rendered absent, Walker's silhouettes function differently. They are overtly fantastical, proclaiming the compensatory nature of their use and the failures these qualities make inevitable. When this use mimics such acts as those which help gendering and racialization to accomplish themselves, it draws the whole process into dialogue with the appropriation of bodies and subjects by ideologies of history. If the tableaux make anything

clear, it is that histories are also scripts, but fragmented ones whose breakage is reenacted in each instance of their performance. In order for them to persist unchanged, it's we actors who need to remain the same.

It is of necessity, then, that Walker conceives of the script as episodic and modifiable, already a distortion. The need to create room in it for one's "own" utterances led, in Walker's case, to the unlikely source of the historical romance genre. Explaining the genre's attraction for her, Walker said, "The loser puts on the attire and assumes the mannerisms of the lost cause. The loser in this case is the defected black teen in 1989, born after the heroism of the Civil Rights movement, spoon-fed new histories and black pride, divorced from meaning and devoid of it, anger without direction."[19] If Walker's "loser" wins the racial tussle only by adopting the script, in doing so she also recognizes it as a performance that one can suspend before the risk of disinvesting in one's own pleasures comes fully to fruition. Much of what the tableaux derive from this literature is a litany of transgressions—particularly sexual relations across the "color line"—to tear from their safe stowage in a quaint genre and restore to a context largely purified of them by official histories. Thus, a central strand of Walker's project involves the suggestion of an unfettered pursuit of a pleasure which, once stripped of the pretense of total success or mastery (as is possible only in fantasy) and proliferated, would remake the map of race relations that invocations of cultural landscapes compulsively posit as fixed. More important than the fact of pleasure, here, is that Walker figures its pursuit as integral to a history of exploitation. If her history is "like" the historical romance, this is because it imagines worlds created by desire and navigated by chiefly libidinal and corporeal needs. Lest we fail to grasp how this might positively affect a situation circumscribed by exploitation, we need only recall Fanon's earlier elegant assertions of desire and difference as forms of intervention: "As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am

not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness.... I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is a world of reciprocal recognitions.... I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence."[20]

As the vignettes comprising *The End of Uncle Tom* indicate, Walker depicts the force of desire as capable of stressing nearly every boundary required for the order of "civilized society" to hold: human and animal, old and young, safe and unsafe, powerful and subjected, consensual and forced. Walker, moreover, locates herself at the site of this blurring: "In order to have a real connection with my history, I had to be somebody's slave. But I was in control: that's the difference."[21] Between the confidence of this statement and the failures of every character of her tableaux to maintain control is an implicit recognition of Freud's belief in "the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavorable to the realization of complete satisfaction."[22] Indeed, when Walker speaks of "seeking... comfort in the fantasy version of one's own body,"[23] she reminds us that the dialectic of desires is at its heart political: "How else can this daughter of afro-suburbia (blind to her circumstances, faithful to her self-image as an a-historical, nonentity... a black hole, if you will) reclaim her presence but by filling that space with a history's worth of fictions?"[24] Walker suggests that a voluntary loss of self is entailed when, in certain encounters, one cannot know whether (or to what extent) one wants the idea or the instance, or one is wanted as an idea or an instance. Jacqueline Rose, writing in another context, has written insightfully of this quandary. "Not to know whether something is real or not (whether you have made it up), to leave the question in suspense," Rose observes, "is a form of creativity. It is the fundamental characteristic of transitional space."[25] Importantly, Walker couches this creativity in terms of failure. We might understand this

failure as one of containing representation, political or identitarian, literary or visual. When Walker, as quoted earlier, depicts her own search for voice as being diverted by various icons of the antebellum and other pasts—a litany of bad object-choices that fork the path from birth into freedom to freedom in the absolute—she thematizes such a failure. The tableaux proffer this failure writ large. Perhaps because of their discomfiting departure from the norm, the tableaux literally impart to the viewer a creative role in the representation of slavery. One hears a great deal about art that lures onlookers into fantasy scenarios; Walker's tableaux, however, derive their power from the elements of reality that obtain in them if thinly. The scenes' active components, because their color and shapes are at once hypersuggestive yet almost eagerly open to interpretation, stimulate distance- and desire-effects that throw open the pictorial structure of slavery that so faithfully serves Walker's detractors. But to resituate slavery's representation within a present-day scheme of things is precisely *not* to disrespect its memory; rather, it acknowledges underscoring what will always remain contemporary about it. If the focus on the present-day does diminish slavery's (and its attendant relations') usefulness as appropriable control tactics, it accomplishes this through a criticism, not quite a subversion, that reveals fixed images of slavery as supplying a discourse of "race relations" with an anachronous underlying order and a poignant lack of historical specificity.

Materially speaking, Walker's instrumentalization of history begins by going beyond its dimension of infinite depth. Of course it is this depth that secures identity, in its most conventional sense, to its traceable origins.[28] Speaking in particular of the venality of the scenarios in the tableaux, David Joselit has remarked this, noting how Walker's recontextualization of the silhouette amplifies its two-dimensionality, bringing to mind the "psychological flatness" that arises when selves are

constituted, and identities composed, in a constant play of surfaces.[27] In such a situation, subject positions relate to one another along a lateral axis, like the one established by the emphatic planarity of the cut-paper silhouette affixed directly to the wall. The silhouette thereby indexes a flattening that routinely occurs in the social, eviscerating "essential human depth."[28] Because "the identities are purely relational" in this scenario, "this is but another way of saying that there is no identity that can be fully constituted."[29]

Joselit's attention to the material-cum-psychological flatness of Walker's silhouettes suggests an important caution against reducing the tableaux to mere images, because their identities as images are implicated in this flattening. To fully appreciate his care, we may extend his claim and see that the tableaux cannot be said to constitute images of slavery—nor even images at all in the sense that they are customarily taken up. Partly by coming forward more adamantly as image-fragment ("cut paper and adhesive on wall") than as picture, these tableaux are the delicate and precarious holdovers of an image lost to the "play of surfaces" through which we exist as images for others. Beginning to square with the difficult possibility that slavery may be no more real—for us, now—than it can become within the terms of this "play," means curbing the urge to restore the tableaux to the realistic mode that they evacuate precisely in order to distinguish themselves.

Like *The End of Uncle Tom*, Walker's *Slavery! Slavery! presenting a* GRAND *and* LIFELIKE *Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery, or, "Life at Ol' Virginny's Hole (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause* (1997) (figs. 2.2, 2.3) works outward from the text of culture, not its originality. *Slavery! Slavery!* presents slavery as couched within the terms of a theatricalized account of historical reality. Inspired by

2.2 Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery! presenting a* GRAND *and* LIFELIKE *Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery, or, "Life at Ol' Virginny's Hole (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause*, 1997. Detail. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 12 × 85 ft. Peter Norton Family Foundation. Installation view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

2.3 Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery!*, 1997. Detail. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

a four-hundred-foot-wide cyclorama in Atlanta (her hometown from adolescence), Walker first presented the piece in a partially cycloramic eighty-five-foot installation. Its graphic component, she says, is meant to be read out "from the central moon and then . . . in both directions," as is a stage when the curtain is first drawn.[30] A play on the "unfolding drama," *Slavery! Slavery!* has little to accomplish, narratively speaking. Or better, it accomplishes by failing. Exaggerating the cyclorama's pretense to grand historical narrative, its two-thirds-life-size figures maintain none of the standard dynamic iconographic or mood elements. Instead of the steady march of tale, setting, and atmosphere that animates the enfolding structure of the conventional history painting, *Slavery! Slavery!* stutters forth, devoid of sentimental dynamics. Its very ambience, in which the comparatively clinical ethos of the gallery substitutes for the dressed and plush surround of the cyclorama hall, is spartan. The work is only quasi-pictorial, even before one tries to account for its insistently discontinuous figural arrangements. A mistress shakes a headless child upside down; a small black boy, dressed in Turkish garb, follows a white prostitute with an atomizer, blowing perfume up her skirts; a little boy is held aloft by and appears to fellate an older white man's gun-shaped hand; a baby is birthed from a watermelon-sized egg; a young interracial couple have sex on the roof of the slaves' quarters; and so on. Walker pictures slavery *as* the subversion of its power structure and the alteration of its characteristic relations of authority, obedience, order, and place-keeping. And crucially these operations extend beyond a critique of the institution itself to one of its means of being visualized—thereby suggesting that an operational affinity may exist between these two regimes. Again, Walker's art contends that to commence the representation of slavery *now* requires one also to give up any pretension that either the subject or its telling will keep their bearings under the pressure of displacement. Some details

look and feel uncannily true-to-life; witness, in this regard, the extreme precariousness of the interracial sex situation on the roof. This is every bit a mark of their historicity, even as other moments operate as shifters—such as the fez-clad sambo—indicating that this account of slavery doesn't even know its place geographically. Both details contribute differently to the logic of disorientation and that both defines Walker's mode of picturing pasts and makes it so readily identifiable as a *contemporary* practice. Walker's specification of "a truth" returns to mind here, as does Homi Bhabha's description of colonial truths as compromised precisely at the level of cultural identification: "It is a displacement of truth in the very identification of culture, or an uncertainty in the structure of 'culture' as the identification of a certain discursive human truth. A truth of the human which is culture's home; a truth which 'differentiates' cultures, affirms [their] human significance, the authority of [their] address."[31]

In a recent monograph devoted to *Slavery! Slavery!*, art historian Robert Hobbs contrasts two of its features, a pair of piles of feces and the bizarre fountain, as opening a "haunting fissure where the Real... has a small but important chance of being discerned." Scatology is prominent in Walker's tableaux—recall that in *The End of Uncle Tom*, feces marks the lone child's path, fixing our attention on Eva's frustrated pursuit of diabolical vengeance. Accordingly, *Slavery! Slavery!* includes two piles of feces, to the right of which a woman is bent by the stench. To explain its function here, Hobbs invokes the "black hole" Walker mentioned earlier. "The equivalent of the black hole and abjection are the piles of dung," Hobbs writes; "the dung signifies the hollowness that attends the rejection of one's current subjectivity."[32] He then compares these low-lying piles to the fountain, in which an apparently live female figure stands atop a monkey squatting on a "Nubianesque" skull. The woman releases a cotton ball from her vagina, issuing a viscous fluid

("milk, blood, piss, spit, or vomit," according to Walker) that comes also from her mouth, breast, and a wound in her back. Hobbs reads the fountain as "portending a fuller, richer, and more complete self."[33] The fountain, we are told, culminates Walker's response to the stereotyping process that makes her condition "so dismal, so total, so unrelievably abject":

> While the feces reinforces the emptiness of a self that has already evacuated itself, the fountain celebrates an ongoing permeable and continuously fecund mirror image that holds out the promise of a fuller self-image even though it is in essence just a stereotype. . . . Located on either side of the slave in shackles . . . the two represent different cycles in the anxious night of destabilization that is the condition of the abject state.[34]

This decisive interpretation betrays so great a determination to bring the unseeable into view—the shaping of Walker's ego by the lingering horrors of slavery—that it cannot discern its own investment in bringing about that interpretation. Yet in countless ways Walker represents the "black hole" as an *un*successful annulment of her consciousness by abjection; most germanely, the fountain itself is as much a black hole as the dung heaps. Such is the delicious paradox of the opaque silhouette: it renders the "anxious night of destabilization" as the general condition of Walker's subjects. Accepting the invitation to derive knowledge from them only proves their success. Hobbs's essay persists beyond what Walker's tableaux set up consistently and aggressively: a barrier to the knowing reading that would make them so many prospects on the artist's outlook or subject position. In this respect the essay commits the same error as Saar's and Harris's readings, which mistake Walker's facility with confounding *identity statements* for an identity as such. Not

least because they prioritize a need to settle the matter of Walker's subjectivity (as if to supply the question "What kind of artist . . . ?" with an answer), all three posit the tableaux as internally consistent images to contemplate from the outside, not as integrally spatial situations that encompass the viewer psychically—creating a stage for a desire to know, to locate elsewhere, that will go unsatisfied—as well as physically. Because these situations are precisely those of identity's formation, not its revelation or discovery, we must concede the possibility that the "anxious night of destabilization" characterizes the daylight-bright looking situation itself just as ably as it describes anything on the wall.

Conceding to the tableaux's anti-iconographical drive need not mean giving up the desire to understand their larger, informing idiom. One need simply grant a place within the situation being analyzed to one's own frustrated desire, as an onlooker, to know (more or less) this place and its people, places and people being the sorts of thing whose meaning one can more or less grasp. As Anne M. Wagner has described the process, "To tell a story about these figures is to decide who and what these figures are and do—as if that were an easy task. It is not. My narrative surely says as much about me and my history, as it does about Walker and hers. And so together artist and viewer conspire in telling the story of race."[35] In fact, such an encounter very nearly becomes do-it-yourself slavery. With each viewing, Walker's botched antebellum narratives engender new tellings of the period, new turns on its truths.

Reading the figures as we would a story, we reach a point when details in themselves (Pickaninnies, clouds, sodomies, cotton balls, fountains) group into vignettes, pushing us back to engage the whole rambling prospect. The scaling and placement of Walker's figures impart the form of a landscape to the blank wall surrounding them. Indeed, the seemingly incidental spatializing elements—trees, clouds, road signs, the implied ground, and perhaps most importantly, the plantation

house—rigorously structure the tableau as a landscape in which we stand. Of course the late Western history of the landscape genre intends, even needs to provide the spectator a space within both its conceptual and practical frameworks. But it is seldom the space of the frustrated scopophilic or unconcealed co-conspirator. By making provisions within landscape for such a figure, Walker articulates landscape as a type of representative enactment, an interested act of social vision.

The larger, wall-scaled tableaux of flat silhouettes and quasi-narrative vignettes embody one of the boldest statements of Walker's ambition—a bigness to be occupied, by which to be requisitioned. Since failures—to testify, to represent, to get it right—lie at the center of Walker's enterprise, it makes sense to consider a few specific kinds of representation that her tableaux are not. How does the flagrancy imparted by this grandiose scale inform their performances of failure? In keeping with a general resistance of genre that entails an acknowledgment of its descriptive efficiency, Walker positions her tableaux as the insolent offspring of the landscape tradition. Treating landscape much as she does the silhouette, Walker turns it to her purposes not simply by evacuating its authenticating epistemologies, but by taking up a dissident position within them. Walker's landscapes have particular ramifications for our understanding of the tradition's contemporary legacy because they understand it as participating—in its formerly dominant pictorial forms as well as its now ascendant ideological ones—in the play of picturings and erasures, desires and violences that are endemic to culture formation.[36]

The tableaux provoke this extended idea of landscape by combining two of its more distinct senses: one arising from the kind of imagi-

nary space we enter upon encountering symbols of the antebellum or slavery; and the other the more fixed sense informed by numerous pictorial representations of landscape. But it is the term "inner plantation," supplied by Walker, that may help us understand the collapse of these two senses in our experience of the tableaux as conceptual landscapes—by way of which we can better grasp landscape as a cultural process that integrates imaginative, artistic, and political picturing practices.[37] About the inner plantation, Walker has said,

> I imagine we all have one. I discovered mine while painting and thinking about what a godlike game it is we artists play with our canvases (or whatever, it was canvases for me at the time) forcing colors and figures and allegories to do our bidding, as if they had no will of their own. Trying to give shape to some perversion or goal in a painting is akin to the "blank slate" attitude of early settlers in America. Maybe it's just a defect of the imagination, but once I began to think of myself—the Painter—as this kind of Master my canvas became the Plantation and anything I put down would be my Slave. But not content to assume this new position I simultaneously freed all those slaves, unchained all the imprisoned Coons, Negroes, Missies, and Mammies and mixed them up with Frederick Douglasses, Nat Turners, Harriet Tubmans.[38]

This account renders the inner plantation as a way to imagine black American historical culture more complexly, which in this case is to say apart from idolatrous personifications of freedom. Still more importantly, it imagines that culture in accordance with the representational practices that would portray it as its norms and its exemplarily unified individual subjects, neither of which strays from the field of power that

authorizes them. The projective force of some of Walker's opponents claims serves to construe this field's preservation precisely as a matter of survival (for personages and the unimpeachable "standards" they uphold). Thus it is entirely appropriate that Walker's implicit response to this power configures it as a problem for the subject with representational needs which the field of power in question (above it is somehow black history and painting all at once) can only understand as "defective."

I want to dwell for a time on the implications of thinking of this as a defection from painting. I think it is important that when Walker explains the "freeing" achieved with the adoption of silhouette as a way to bring about the ruination of the painted picture (which compelled her discovery of the inner landscape by constraining it) by dispersing a seemingly random selection of its component parts in space, she does so in a way that remains dependent upon the conceptualization of landscape. Specifically, using silhouettes was also a way to decline the "godlike game" of painting. In a useful coincidence for our purposes, the line "linking" Walker to the plantation runs parallel to the (historicist) one that "roots" modernist abstraction in aspects of the problem that landscape, or the representation of the world in its specificity, presented to the first serious practitioners and interpreters of modern painting. In a process whereby painting gradually abandoned the difficulties thrown up by depicting the social, modernism can be shown to have figured the landscape ever more philosophically until it was subsumed by abstraction. By 1964, then, modernism's realism had become so supra-optical that it was possible for Michael Fried, in a stirring defense of the modernist project shared by committed painters and critics, to suggest this: "While modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual

dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience, that is, of life itself."[39] Yet this is just the sort of substitutive action required of anyone who dreams of picture-sized accounts of "life itself." What remains urgent for us about modernism in particular is how it vested *painting* with the capacity to commit this action. In a well-known response to the regime of opticality in modernist criticism, Rosalind Krauss turns to the writing of John Ruskin, a forebear of this modernism. Arguing that American modernism's triumphalist accounts of opticality are prefigured there, Krauss reads even Ruskin's account of his boyhood travels as *a practice of abstraction* avant la lettre:

> Travel is . . . not a release from but a luxuriating into the same rapt stare that is the medium of John Ruskin's daily life. And he glories in it, calling [his family's] style of passing through foreign lands a mode of "contemplative abstraction from the world." . . . Ruskin's view-hunting is a means of transforming the whole of nature into a machine for producing images, establishing in this way an autonomous field of the visual. . . . *Modern Painters* sets out to prove the superiority of landscape painting over all other art because its field is precisely this domain of the purely visual.[40]

Ruskin nourished this view with the belief that the "whole of nature's" unification in a picture-like structure manifested God's law. By extension, the proper structuring of pictures might enable one to remanifest that repeatedly, in one's own mortal way.

Krauss sheds light on a few of those abstracting properties of the landscape that made the inner plantation, for Walker, an attractive way to opt out of the "godlike game" of painting and gain a kind of provisional

authority for another kind of truth. Walker's affection for the very social antagonisms banished in the effort to unify pictorial space led to an uncompromising campaign of figuration—literally a revolution of the subject. Th[e] pressure her figures exert prevents the formation of a unified field—stretching it over eighty-five feet and out of our field of vision in *Slavery! Slavery!* Moreover, the tableaux's graphic as well as historical specificity, even as it eludes certain description, denies all possibility of total abstraction. As the exuberantly intercultural situations comprising *The End of Uncle Tom* and *Slavery! Slavery!* evince, when Walker freed "all those slaves, unchained all the imprisoned Coons, Negroes, Missies, and Mammies and mixed them up with Frederick Douglasses, Nat Turners, Harriet Tubmans," she released them into a field populated by the masters and mistresses who once held them. In so doing, she declined participation in the American cultural abstraction that reduces the complex interchanges among antebellum personalities to a static roster of historical personages and endlessly replayed events. In this way, Walker disaggregated two approaches to the landscape, the eventless pictorial and the race-specific cultural one, demonstrating their symbolic dependence on one another.

The silhouette provided key means to effect this breakage in a way peculiar to the U.S. context, where the notion of "forcing colors and figures and allegories to do our bidding" metaphorizes dominant American practices of culture creation (of affecting hegemony) as forcefully as it does painting. Walker hints at the counterhegemonic strength of the silhouette when she describes her scenes' inevitable failures in "attempting to organize themselves into a GRAND historical landscape but with restless characters who disrupt the scene with their farts and vomit and general disbelief in an empirical tradition that doesn't even love them."[41] Indeed, when the silhouette prevailed as a recreational pastime in the United States, the grandiose landscape occupied the apogee of the

artistic spectrum. And while that landscape was an adamantly public form, the silhouette was prized for its privacy (until the twentieth century it was used principally to commemorate cohesive social entities, such as individuals and families). Walker's tableaux can be seen to perform a double insubordination, then, in deconstituting the silhouette's private identity and using its flat crudity to underscore the artifice of the outsized allegorical landscape. The combined effect, of course, is to make the tableaux appear as commemorations of an incipient form of politicization against the normalizing framework of legislated representations of the past. The figures and their activities, in their very dispersal, form an organized resistance against a locus of authority as such, which, too, can be difficult to trace to the artist alone. (They are also what *we* make them.) In these ways, as well as by infusing her tableaux with marginal, pathological, and criminal social forms—they are a veritable inventory of deviances—Walker boldly undermines the witness function that conventional silhouettes and landscapes perform, both historically and ideologically, on their creators' behalf. By locating all these heresies within a single field, perhaps even subduing them to it, the tableaux also point to the capaciousness of landscape, as an idiom, to absorb and amplify the power of rhetorical, political, and historical representations. For these, too, contribute to what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the group of "strategies by which certain conventions of landscape are forcibly naturalized."[42]

The conception of the American landscape as a value in itself has always depended on visual representations, though these were never as spare as Walker's tableaux. Especially for many nineteenth-century American artists and aestheticians, painting, landscape, and the creation of a new history were interlocking parts of a drive to reconcile the real with the ideal through unifying rhetorical architectures of nation.[43] Allegories drawing on the symbolics of landscape were particularly

effective means of erasing the spirit of dissent shot through a country reeling from the effects of civil war and full-scale industrialization. A ready model existed in the rugged Titanism of the European mountainscape, which had propelled romantic artists to a synthesis of culturalist philosophy and practice. Transliterated in the United States, it served the rhetorical aims of new democracy. As Copley wrote, "He who stands on Mount Albano and looks down on ancient Rome, has his mind peopled with the gigantic associations of the storied past; but he who stands on the mounds of the West... experiences the sublimity of a shoreless ocean un-islanded by the recorded deeds of man."[44] Such particularly engrossing appreciations as Albert Bierstadt's *Grandeur of the Rockies*, Sanford Gifford's *Adirondacks*, Jasper Cropsey's *Starrucca Viaduct*, and Asher Durand's *Progress*, for instance, were widely circulated at this time. If America's present *was* history, these grandly unpeopled works mobilized the idea that "the great personality of the New Continent" *was* the land whose fullest envisioning was, in some considerable measure, the artist's to help secure.[45]

To achieve the metaphysical fullness that made these works "representative" pictures of American life, they had to proscribe the processes most vital to American culture-making. Thus, such representations repressed "inconsistencies" in national personality, such as the regional and racial conflicts quickened by the problematic Americanness of black and American Indian populations. I want to suggest that Walker's tableaux evacuate that fullness in the name of these inconsistencies—almost as if to fill the negative spaces of a prettified national picture, emphatically asserting that this mode of erasure remains very much with us, that its powers may now be shared by those it was cultivated to cancel politically. The tableaux's ecstatic release of figural incongruity portrays what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the "*simultaneity* of violence

and culture formation" in the United States.[66] The specific occupations of the human figures—surreptitious interracial courtship and sex, same-sex desire, casual birthing, cannibalism, bestiality, lynching, murder, and sudden leakage of all body cavities—respond to the tradition of the "original" with a catalogue of its unrepresentables, an inglorious memorial to its "not-theres."

In the larger, countermemorial sense, the decidedly unconstructive nature of the characters' occupations thwarts both biological and communal reproductive processes, suggesting the arrest of the untroubled flow of "culture" from one historical phase to the next, which flow obviates the necessity of revision. But for all this, the tableaux's historical sense is not oriented toward the past, nor even to founding alternatives to it. The dynamic of history, according to this work, "is in the ways of thinking and in the choices of the present time . . . [which] allow greater play and lesser defensive rigidity."[67] There is an all-around failure to jell, beginning with the body and moving outward to encompass the whole of the frameless viewing situation. Consider how the pivotally placed characters and limbs in Walker's 1998 *Virginia's Lynch Mob* (fig. 2.4) appear to form a collective, energetic right-to-left procession. The title directs us first to seek out the figure to be lynched. We surmise it is the naked, noosed black man just right of center, leading himself by the hanging rope, which has been cut. If this weren't disorienting enough, the slaver marching behind him has repurposed the rope to lasso an eagle from the sky. Discovering this oddity, one realizes that most of the figures in the tableau work against its momentum by going the wrong way: among them, a little girl who shields herself from the backward thrust of a suicidal boy's hat and brain, a cannibalistic eagle, and a pistol-packing toddler. The indirection that prevails in *Virginia's Lynch Mob*, confirmed by the absolute unknowability of the mob's intent, contrasts

2.4 Kara Walker, *Virginia's Lynch Mob*, 1998. Detail. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 10 × 37 ft. Brent Sikkema, New York. Installation view. Forum for Contemporary Art. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

sharply with the purposefulness long dominant in narratives of American culture formation. In this respect, the tableau bears comparison to two well-known nineteenth-century paintings. The first is George Caleb Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (1851–52; fig. 2.5), a hybrid of history, genre, and landscape painting that exemplifies this theme appositely. The painting depicts an unbroken charge of focused "republican pathfinders" negotiating a rugged mountain pass in single file. Daniel Boone is positioned centrally, at the head of the line; square-jawed and striking the pose of the soldier, he marches directly toward the viewer. Bingham placed Boone at the base of a pyramidal grouping of figures, in which David Lubin has observed a resemblance to Boone, implying "that a new generation of leaders is coming through the ranks."[48] Bingham appears to tender the guarantee by extending a row of silhouetted figures all the way to the picture's vanishing point, where they disappear behind a granite outcropping. The procession that Boone leads forms a remarkably stable prop for the surface of Bingham's picture, which delivers its message all the more forcefully for the patriots' evidently unfailing support. *Virginia's Lynch Mob* takes just this kind of decisive and contained action and pictorial structure and theatricalizes them. Imagine Walker's tableau rotated outward from left to right to a ninety-degree angle to the wall: instead of forming a parade as seen from a sidewalk, its mob would approach the viewer, the leaping, grass-skirted girl leading the way, like Bingham's Boone. The difference between these outlooks on the depiction of purpose is not exhausted by the limitations of Walker's medium but rather helped by them: it is the difference between the consummate symbolic action and a ceremony without an occasion, between moralizing statement and variable uncertainty.

The distracted interracial procession of *Virginia's Lynch Mob* also upsets the vision of cultural ascension implicit in *On to Liberty*, a three-by-six-foot oil painting by Theodor Kaufmann, created in 1867, four

2.5 George Caleb Bingham, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap*, 1851–52. Oil on canvas, 36½ × 50¼ in. Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis. Gift of Nathaniel Phillips.

years after emancipation (fig. 2.6). It depicts a familial grouping of former slaves, of whom the nearest to us form a friezelike arrangement not dissimilar to the tableaux's. The dubious ecology of the setting allows Kaufmann to offer a narrative of emancipation sympathetic to the idea of northern beneficence, as his figures head out of a darkened forest toward the bright light of freedom at a Union army base set in a sunblanched background (the middleground figures already begin to blend in: is this safety in invisibility?). Kaufmann organizes this group in the most conventional of ways, with women, lined up behind a rangefinding male figure, bearing the possessions and towing the smallest children. He also lends the active group a powerful coherence through physical arrangement, such that they form a kind of group portrait of black America in microcosm. Evenly spaced clusters of figures remain tightly formed in themselves, with all but two members pitched rightward toward the light of freedom. This group's social blackness is structurally integral to Kaufmann's thematization both of America's distinct, divine grace in "forgiving" racial difference and of a collective purpose for black America.

In dramatic contrast to both these works, *Virginia's Lynch Mob* offers up committed purposelessness and a jubilant culture of diversions. To be sure, its subject is just as sanguine: the lynch mob evokes one of the most terrorizing images in American memory. But Walker's tableau does more than take the framework of national accomplishment and stage a mock-pictorial celebration of its unpictured events.[49] Because *Virginia's Lynch Mob* adopts the form of a parade momentarily stopped while passing in front of the viewer, one experiences it also as a function of time. We catch the piece in medias res; the parade is unfinished, the picture still coming together. The strange time of the event may affect us most palpably when transmitted through one of the several moments of unexpected tenderness between characters, as when a

2.6 Theodor Kaufmann, *On to Liberty*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 36 × 56 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Erving and Joyce Wolf. 1982.443.3. ALSO PLATE 2.

little girl kindheartedly extends to a black boy a freshly sewn Klansman's hood, or when a boy laborer receives a piggyback ride from the eagle-fixated slaver. Uneven as they are, these affections mark the importance of cross-cultural play in Walker's tableaux.[36] For America was always interracial; it was its "characteristic" groupings and relations (like those depicted by Bingham and Kaufmann) that were not. The harmony of figural groupings with landscape settings in works such as Bingham's and Kaufmann's both honors and extends the ideology of cohesive intracultural (group) relations as precondition of national health. Such play is, of course, an index of the ineradicable mutuality of human relations that conventionalized depictions of American race relations frequently ignore, hypostatize, or portray as somehow counter to established cultural intent. There resides a canny strangeness in the fact that moments such as those I just described are probably the most familiar and accessible anywhere in the tableaux for contemporary viewers. They are the most upfront statement of Walker's project's contemporaneity. Notwithstanding the extremes to which Walker puts them, the fact that they are naturalized occurrences in the tableaux's cosmology may well constitute the works' greatest offense, in *reminding* us of those benign as well as malignant distortions of the social order that are now real and regular features of contemporary life. To indulge this connection is to see these unexpected intimacies transform into powerful counterbalances to the mob's reign of directionless.

I am suggesting that with these simultaneously formal and symbolic interventions, the tableaux open "landscape" in order to locate within it some of what our prevalent historical and contemporary conceptions of the American nineteenth century have attempted to put under erasure. But in doing so, the tableaux claim no more intimate involvement with their subjects than their sources can allow. And because so many of Walker's sources are sentimental forms in which the cultivation

of affect takes primacy over depictive acts per se, the matter of distance in space *and* time is vital.[51] Two of Walker's earliest tableaux reference iconic sentimentalist narratives of antebellum life, both authored by women without firsthand experience of their subjects: her 1995 *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegory of Eva in Heaven*, with which I opened this chapter, cites *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* and *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (fig. 2.7), Walker's 1994 debut work, refers to Margaret Mitchell's 1937 novel *Gone with the Wind.* Of the latter book, Tony Horwitz has said that it has "done more to keep the Civil War alive, and to mold its memory, than any history book or event since Appomattox."[52]

Gone extends across fifty feet, its elements reaching from floor to ceiling. Walker has described it as a "dream" in which the Negress reverses the terms of her sexual exploitation by her master; and, in the manner of a dream, the final correlation between content and meaning will forever remain the secret of the dreamer.[53] To the left, we presume, is the historical romance itself, skewed Walker-style: a skinny-waisted belle and chivalrous gentleman lean into each other, bidding goodnight or farewell, with an inexplicable extra pair of legs poking out from the woman's skirts. Nearby a cryptic exchange occurs between a little girl (at water's edge, gesticulating with a dead fowl) and a woman rafting on a lake beside the floating bust of a gentleman; on a neighboring island, a young black girl fellates a white boy, who gestures longingly toward another child headed heavenward under the influence of his dirigible penis; and so on: these absurd iterations get tiring after a point, as *Gone* is itself a fantasy space upon which Walker's graphic detail bears down in only the most preliminary of ways. Her marks and scene-esque design, as it were, only get the ball rolling. Narrative description of the exhaustive sort that few of us can avoid (the present writer included)

2.7 Kara Walker, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 13 × 50 ft. Yvonne Force Inc., New York. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

shifts the work precisely out of its native register; it asks it for something the work is quite evidently not equipped or interested to supply. But the lakeside kiss tells us, quoting the novel, that this is the eve of the Civil War. Right? Perhaps, but so too does the title shift the battle site to the unnarratable space "Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart"—making *Gone* a fantastical retelling, squared. As if to demark fantasy as the primary modality in which it participates (as both artistic statement and viewing experience), *Gone*, as so many later tableaux would, establishes a context far more pointedly than any of its particulars convey or clarify content. It locates us someplace incapable of being mapped, except in relation to *the problem of location*, such as the one Walker creates by compelling viewers toward a creative reengagement with forms required by convention to remain static. Walker clears a space for this problematic reengagement by generating distance effects. *Gone* frames its events with two twelve-foot expressions of mossy southern swamp out of which the characters' flurry seems to flow, first toward the center and then, on the guidance of the boy mounted on the rock, upward. The illogic of the overall amplifies one's sense that the "clearer picture" that might occupy this space has, in this instance, *failed to accomplish itself*. This effect of a gathering action not taken creates the impression that the forms, the space of the installation, and even onlookers have been caught up in a gradual unmassing operation, one most consequential for the dark density that attends images of the antebellum, forbidding its romanticization while permitting its constant reenactment as tragedy.

In a similar way, *The End of Uncle Tom* imagines Stowe's evangelistic characters apotheosized and reveling in transgressions forbidden during their earthly lives in Stowe's depiction of the Old South. In both cases, the figures are "freed" from the prescriptions of the social order that the sentimentalist texts doubly inscribed by carrying over, but into

which they also constituted an intervention. If the sentimental mode served as a conduit into the "unimaginable," it met a need in doing so: it founded a shared space of relief from the insufferable repression of interest in that which the unimaginable would not knowingly account. As in the original, then, Walker's repurposed sentimentalism structurally alters the problem to which it is an answer, most fundamentally by effecting a shift in the work's relation to its surround from passive context to active construction.

I want to understand this ensemble of spatializing gestures as part of a strategy to attenuate the discursive density that constrains present-day representations of slavery by imposing variously explicit rules for engaging the subject. I want to further suggest that Walker's critical action in this respect operates formally, through a strategic presentism manifest in the silhouettes' indifference to nature and the derivativeness of her "narratives." It works still more profoundly by using a densely symbolic image of slavery "in the original"—the prevalent Big House, the axis of the plantation's centrifugal economy, lay just over the head of the raft-bound woman in *Gone* and above the pooping baby's path in *The End of Uncle Tom*, surrounded by plantation real estate; there are three in *Slavery! Slavery!*—as an axial and recurring motif that makes of each of the many tableaux in which it appears a shameless statement of committed misremembering (fig. 2.8). The example in *The End of Uncle Tom* is the most adamantly preposterous of all: a stately Georgian home is flanked by two trees, on one side by an evergreen and on the other by a palm tree that soars to double the height of the house. The image of the tree is itself a bold statement of unaccountability for slavery, as it seems to ask for reading as an index of how terribly out of focus this object has become for members of Walker's generation—and yet it is thrust back, not altogether eliminated. Indeed, in many all-too-real institutional frameworks, slavery remains a horizon-defining icon in the

2.8 Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom*, 1995. Detail. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

culture, conditioning perception from within as well as without. As I interpret Walker's uses of this element, it signals that a mediation has taken place, through, for instance, works like Stowe's and Mitchell's, or even Thomas Dixon's racist historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Klansman*, another important source for Walker. In the sense of legitimating the testimonial value of the desire of the dreamer herself, Walker's tableaux both identify with their sources and merely take advantage of an opening already created by them. This kind of testimony differs strongly from the kind offered by Walker's censors in that it references an *affective*, not legislative, truth—one which bluntly admits that a distortion of its subject is unavoidable.

By using, like filters, forms that openly display the contrivances of authorial desire, Walker's tableaux redraw the route from here to slavery as hopelessly diverted in respect to its endpoint. They mark as their principal field of action a middle ground where one can enter a relationship with the past only by forging one. This middle ground diagrams, if melodramatically, a kind of truth that hereditary histories cannot take on board without collapse—histories are by nature determining. There is no course back to the plantation untouched by "outside" efforts to motivate our conceptualization of that place by settling the terms of arrival in advance.

Thus far I have been speculating about the counterhegemonic work Walker's tableaux do in punctuating the overworked spaces common in the sentimentalist nineteenth century. But what does all this freshly made emptiness make possible? The black-on-white tableaux give one very little reason to consider how they *use* the space surrounding the silhouettes. Clearly it is a conceit that heightens their legibility and secures

its leveling blackness all the more firmly. I want briefly to consider the value of this element for the emancipation of specificity—of singular bodies and events, desires and differences—as a strategy that might ultimately open for good the airless and dark space reigning in certain conventional portrayals of the period. Walker's project is of course but one of many constrained by this convention, which goes well beyond the regulation of formal propositions about slavery. For such regulatory practices are also styles of imagining the present according to the self-preserving and unmodifiable structuring of social relations (including relations to self) given by slavery.

In *Painting the Dark Side*, a study of gothic imagery in nineteenth-century American visual culture, art historian Sarah Burns observes that mid-nineteenth-century abolitionist artists favored the image of the fugitive slave running north through the forest or swamp as a metaphor for the horrors of slavery.[34] These depictions capitalized on familiar representations of the South made popular in the North through works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which were widely read, promoted in well-circulated illustrated magazines, and enacted onstage. A painting such as Thomas Moran's *Slave Hunt, Dismal Swamp, Virginia* (1862; fig. 2.9) exemplifies the type of image that conjures, in Burns's words, "the widespread northern vision of the southern landscape as an endless tract of swampy wilderness, dark, sinister, and deadly."[35] Indeed, Moran paints the slave hunt as if viewing it through a cavern door. In the left foreground, a black woman and man wade in a river, huddled together. The hunting party approaches them along a path from the right, its advance obscured by the almost uniform darkness of that part of Moran's painting—a mass which the hunting party's motivation appears to shift leftward toward the couple frozen with fright. While the outcome is uncertain, Moran's viewer would have no difficulty identifying that, in

2.9 Thomas Moran, *Slave Hunt, Dismal Swamp, Virginia*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 34 × 44 in. The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma (1947.8.44). Gift of Laura A. Clubb.

his painting, "the South itself is the national dungeon or haunted castle, the slaves its persecuted innocents, fleeing in panic."[56]

In nonabolitionist painting, too, dense darkness performed a crucial sentimentalizing function. As a work like T. Addison Richards's *River Plantation* (ca. 1859; fig. 2.10) makes plain, darkness provided a way to bury or otherwise forswear the fact of slavery in representations of situations where it was an ineluctable fact of life. The black figures located in Richards's genre scene actually occupy the foreground, where a man leads three horses along a road, following four other figures diminishing in scale ahead of him. Above them and to their right, Richards locates the main attraction: a quintessential romantic landscape finely detailing the live oaks, flanking river, and country lane that give the surrounding its ambience. These elements stand out with equal force, in a way typifying a view Richards promulgated in his writing on the southern landscape: "She has the loveliest of valleys," he wrote, "composed and framed like the dream of the painter."[57] This falsely artless appreciation would obscure, if thinly, a strategy common to romantics like Richards, just as surely as the painting buries a house that lies at the end of the road. As John M. Vlach points out: "Deep in the shadows one can just make out the suggestion of the columned facade of a planter's house, an indication that the unsupervised black figures are, in fact, slaves. Here nature acts as a curtain that shields the plantation from all but the most prying eyes."[58] Indeed, the painting gives every reason to assume that Richards regarded the house and slaves as incidental features in the landscape as such. As contributors of small change relative to the total payout, they might fulfill Thomas Gainsborough's interest in details that "create a little business for the Eye to be drawn from the Trees in order to return to them with more glee."[59] No matter what precise interest Richards took in his human subjects, their link to the house

2.10 T. Addison Richards, *River Plantation*, ca. 1859. Oil on canvas, 20¼ × 30 in. Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia.

and its camouflage is not without descriptive intent: it corroborates a more general romantic tendency to elide the appearance of labor with the culturo-economic notion of the "natural" laborer's place in the greater order. In such depictions, Ann Bermingham observes, "The life of... country people *seems* to be their own."[60]

By great contrast, when Walker puts light on the subject of slavery in her tableaux, she radically alters our sense of the services performed in that context. The works commit no simple reversal nor an uncomplicated adoption of the "slave's perspective." Rather, everyone is drawn away from their assigned places in the social and labor economy of the plantation: the laborers have abandoned their posts, the planters dismounted their horses. This is to say, Walker locates her playfields, and situates us, at the near edge of plantation life—decidedly *not* in it. Difficult as it is to accept, we cohabit this space-time to the extent that by our psychic labor, we continually reengage and reinvent the institution's "characteristic" sites and relations as nourishment for the feverish exercise of the racial imagination. The hypersexual terms of the tableaux's wager themselves depend on our acceptance of what Hamza Walker vividly describes as the "transition of sex from... utilitarian ends to an erotic surplus that stands outside the ends of slavery," in reference to the suckling chain in *The End of Uncle Tom*.[61] Accepting the tableaux's wager, then, means turning to face what may be the most obdurate of the darkened "spaces" at which these works direct their unbearable lightness: this is the space of black consciousness—Fanon describes it as "held out as an absolute density, as filled with itself, a stage preceding any invasion"[62]—that would exempt itself from mediation in the social, for instance by proscribing any "breaking through" that involves "talking about, or to, whites."[63] If, from such a vantage point, slavery is the fixed star away from which black consciousness moves in ever more self-assured strides, it is, inside Walker's tableaux, the barely visible backdrop

anchoring a "mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and desire" in the construction of all our human relationships.[64]

None of the objectifying atmospheric density of the foregoing images—Moran's, Richards's, or Harris's—obtains in Walker's tableaux. Depictions as dissimilar as Moran's and Richards's share a common culture of representations that sought in various ways to "stop time" by sentimentalizing the rural landscape partly as a defense against encroaching industrialization (manifested by abolition, in the case of southern artists such as Richards).[65] Notably, the threat of industrialization reinforced that of abolition, causing many southern artists to commit special energy to such representations. Luminism offered an even more aggressive defense. The often overlooked chromatic whiteness of Walker's tableaux is as constitutive in them as the black paper silhouettes; the whiteness is what makes the unmassing of the sentimentalized portrayal of slavery (writ large) not possible, but necessary. I propose that we think of this light's function within the tableaux as akin to, but crucially divergent from, that of luminism, in that the tableaux critically forgo luminism's chief instrument of transcendence: the impression of stopped time.

Art historian Barbara Novak has remarked on the stoppage of time in luminist painting by citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's observation that "time as the immanent object of a consciousness is time brought down to one uniform level, in other words it is no time at all."[66] Novak argues that luminism "converts the present into timelessness," and consequently converts time into space.[67] Hence the ideological action of those skies in nationalist landscapes (Novak's examples are works by Bierstadt, Copley, and Fitz Hugh Lane) whose vacuous yet resplendent density, some of their creators imagined, could Americanize the viewer by the sheer power of absorption.[68] Importantly, in the luminist construction of landscape, the painter is not author but witness. Deputized by God and underwritten by nation (often literally), his paintings are visual

testimonies to the land's fulfillment of His promise, testimonies upon which the viewer reflects: "The Luminist self is at once self-reliant, transcendent, pragmatic, and private, inviting also a private response from the spectator, who often must conceptualize his or her own size, reduce it to thought, before entering the painting. In this instance the mirroring [of nature, in the painting] extends from artist's thought to spectator's thought."[69] And this unbroken circuitry of "reflections" from artist to painting to viewer secures the "national subject" in its glorious permanence.

Walker's tableau engages time and its onlooker with the same dynamism Novak describes. But it uses the interminable time of the "inner plantation" to refract and break up the scheme prized by those for whom the antebellum can only remain the immanent object of consciousness. Its open structure—physically stated by the presence of the wall incompletely occupied by the silhouettes, and emphatically reinforced by the ceaseless relay of the identificatory process between figures and viewers—starkly mocks the "selfless" picture of culture as stopped time. This guarantees only that we will experience it as powerfully impermanent, as sets of choices put forth in the constantly mutating plots and possibilities of self these choices represent. The silhouettes occupy this space only in the name of what and who might have been in it. They do so not to change history but to ask how it determines the way we can think now. The crucial shift here is one of mood: from the indicative authority of the testimonial statement to the subjunctive authority of the fantastic conjecture.

With this shift in mood, the tableaux make the more forceful proposition that there may be a testimony to the past that does not foreclose but rather multiplies the modes of possible relation between then and now, extending them in unforeseen directions. To achieve this proposition, Walker's tableaux unfurl the tight weave of the sentimentalist pic-

ture and leave it that way, appropriating the forward voicing to the form of the sentimentalist fiction to inform the nomination of characters and themes. Their antebellum is but a text one can enter at any point to reach the same end: a passage in the story of race that "gathers [its subject] up as play, activity, production and practice."[70] If Walker's tableaux emphasize play, it is because play marks the constitution of a sphere of *distraction from the closed object* and a consequent activation of pleasure in its opening. They constitute their subject, then, in its dispersion, opening it from the start to contingencies disconnected from authorial intention. According to Roland Barthes, apprehending objects of this sort is not limited to insurgent action but is unavoidably interventionary. What is lost by opting out is precisely the sociality of the situation (which the object simply occasions) affecting viewer and viewed by "joining them in a single signifying practice." Because the object bears itself openly as a social space, it remains open to *un*authorized engagements and therefore is impossible to seal. Extending landscape's time in this way is but a function of exploding its space. In the resulting fissures, we arrive at a certain awareness of responsibility for these scenes which, in establishing themselves as insistently social, nullify the possibility of absolute distinction between the "world of the representation" and the world they occupy. The coimplication of these worlds invites consideration of other contemporary artists' means of restoring the abridged pictorial vista to the world of varied, only slightly more broken prospects that we variously call "the social," "context," and the "institutions of art." Yet these modes of restoration have no self-evident value; they must be specified.

The tableaux do not neglect the architectural dimension but rather utilize the space they inhabit. The choreography of the elements comprising a tableau will be limited to the available wall space, prepared only with light sanding (to secure adhesion) and a fresh coat of paint. Moreover, their "composition" usually entails Walker's gathering of her

materials—paper (usually black photographer's backdrop), knives, white crayons, and adhesives—and arraying them on a large table in or near the installation site. The configuration's exact nature is not determined beforehand. Instead, working from a sketchbook and some notes, Walker draws, cuts out, and hangs the figures on-site. The main support for her work, then—in addition to the viewer herself and the very notion of "cultural landscape"—is the raw fact of the gallery or museum wall. In this respect the work's abiding conceptualism is critical. One is aided in thinking about the way Walker's tableaux occupy space by recalling Blinky Palermo's revaluation of the wall, in the garishly colored site-specific paintings he produced between 1968 and 1973, as a formal element in the elaboration of suprapictorial space. Palermo's works frequently encompassed architectural elements such as moldings and doorframes, suggesting a realism radical enough to insinuate itself in the world without great encumbrance by its artfulness.[71] Walker's fantastical tableaux, oddly, have often done the same, both by encompassment and by implication. *Emancipation Approximation*, for instance, when it debuted at the 1999 Carnegie International, wound a path between the marble lintels and pilasters in an opulent neoclassical museum space. At once integral and ornamental, the work asked to be seen as both a part of, and a (re)mark upon, its site. In a very different way, Lawrence Weiner's conceptualization of a work as constituted by its entire cultural context also provides a context for thinking the cognitive and social implications of the unbounded dimension of Walker's tableaux. Somewhat like the statements Weiner prints over large expanses of unprepared wall, Walker's are *visual* enunciations that exist—to be realized as such upon their uptake by viewers. In themselves, they refer in an open-ended way to lives, stereotypes, times, and places that originate and expand beyond what Weiner called the "aesthetically contracted space" of the gallery.[72] In this profound similarity of principle to Weiner's work,

Walker's tableaux come to be regarded as a shorthand for the means by which art becomes meaning, becomes culture. In grammatically distinct ways, both artists remind us that a considerable measure of art's work gets done *off the wall*, when interest and utility coalesce in events of interpretation.

From these examples of work by Palermo and Weiner considered in relation to the tableaux, we take the small but important reminder that the plane against which an image (or message) appears can hardly be said to guarantee the stability of a composition. Another important if unexpected affinity, this time with minimal sculpture, helps to clarify the complex landscape effect generated by Walker's tableaux.

I am thinking particularly of the very spare means with which the tiled floor constructions of Carl Andre can evoke a phenomenological experience of landscape. Although they take up what Mel Bochner called "common space" in only the slightest way, their slightness draws the viewer into an extraordinary relationship to them and the spaces they occupy.[73] Because physically bound to the floor in quadrilateral forms that, due to tonal and textural contrasts with their site, we have no trouble conceptualizing volumetrically, Andre's sculptures, when encountered, generate the sense (and *only* the sense) that they are the solid base of a volume extending upward. As Gregory Battcock observed, "It is the lowest level of space that counts most" to the impression that "the space above that level can be filled without being enclosed."[74] These works use the viewer's body to give relatable proportion to that shape, so that each floor piece becomes an underline for the space continually displaced by a body. The awareness of this underlining effect comes, and fast, when one passes out of the space of the floor, across the low raised edge of the work, and thereby into this phenomenological zone.

A similar effect arises from all but one of the tableaux discussed here (the exception is *Virginia's Lynch Mob*). Except for the rectangularity of

the wall, no certain architectonic sense links the various elements of a scene, establishes its borders, or limits it intrinsically—in effect, distinguishing it from "here." The illusion of voluminous space is amplified by the objects Walker places both at her figures' feet (e.g., piles of feces) and at what would be the horizon line in a more comprehensive kind of picture. These minuscule, seemingly inconsequential elements are in fact critical to the scenography, both indicating proportion and articulating the space implied as more or less obstructed by the parades of activity. These elements appear to rest on the ground that would result if the wall plane were rotated down and away from the viewer, creating the impression that the event space is continuous with that of its viewing. The two-thirds-life-size scale of the figures amplifies this effect, their collective tendency to move forward and spread out suggesting an imminent integration with us—or more properly, facilitating the fantasy participation that is the precondition of looking this long. Walker ratcheted up this incorporative component in 2000, when, in works such as *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, yet We Pressed On)* (fig. 2.11), she darkened the room, overlaid one or two overhead projectors with colored theater gels and drawings on transparencies, and washed the wall-bound silhouettes and surrounding architectural space in colored light. To drive the point home, Walker frequently embeds amidst the larger figures minuscule, two- to three-inch silhouettes that are impossible to comprehend from a safe distance. These inclusions couple with the fact that the projection works usually span corners and occupy a large part of the spaces where they're installed. Thus more difficult than the tableaux simply to *reflect* upon, these works openly construct spaces to be occupied, luxuriated in, perhaps escaped. The silhouette elements within *Insurrection*, for instance, cover two walls and are awash in a trapezoidal mass of colored light. They anchor a collaged scene that conjures the plantation surrealistically, in several incommensurate modes

2.11 Kara Walker, *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, yet We Pressed On)*, 2000. Detail. Projection, cut paper, and adhesive on wall, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2000.68. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co. ALSO PLATE 3.

of representation (cut, traced, drawn; schematic and naturalistic) from inside and outside the house inside which the rebellion began. *Insurrection* locates the viewer in the midst of the dilapidation of a plantation by a violent and zany slave rebellion that works outward, from inside the big-house foyer to a swampy, Moranesque outland. The light of the projectors reproduces us as, and enmeshes us with, the silhouettes. Though not indistinguishably: our shadows are waterier, less substantially black. To be suspended in such riotous scenes—bathed in colored light and screened—is to renounce the possibility of dissociation from the work. The specific role attaching to viewers in this coincidence also implies a form of involvement, conscious or otherwise, in the work's *project*: we become instrumental in *Insurrection*'s plot to disarrange the established picture of the slaves' priorities, even in rebellion, by professing an inability to remember or represent faithfully their historically specific, nonidentical senses of purpose.

The difference between the *illusion* of continuous space created by the spatializing elements at the "horizon" and the *establishment* of an active space where the characters' actions become continuous with our own is the difference between a historical landscape and a contemporary situation—and also the difference between the representation of slavery and engaged, critical speculation about its residua and mediation in the present. I am arguing that these elements mark the space of our exchanges with the characters as a manifestly local present, a here and now that separates Walker's testimony to what she calls "*a* truth" from another's arbitration on behalf of *the* truth.[73] When after the first round of her campaign Betye Saar conceded that she had "nothing against Kara,

except that she's young and foolish," perspective was a key part of her censorial apparatus. It is the perspective thought to be a natural function of proximity to a problem or event, which Saar and others remark when they suggest that they can see in "negative images" what Walker, for instance, cannot.[76]

Indeed, in a classically arranged landscape, the viewer's eye is drawn along the same path that the feet might travel if the space depicted were truly three-dimensional. Walker's landscapes allow no such ambulation. Turning again to *The End of Uncle Tom*, the illusion of massive depth works to lure the eye to points beyond the point at which the central activity stops it, fixing it in horizontal movement along a path running parallel to the action. Here, it stops at charged spots—the three suckling women, the anus-birthing Uncle Remus type, or Eva with her inverted axe—but there are no means, really, to make a scene of this play of surfaces that includes the background elements. Whatever provides compositional stability to this sweep of cutouts does not originate with Walker's marking; it comes partly from the integral supporting wall, and partly from the viewer's desire to penetrate the markings and organize the event into *a picture that establishes itself* in organized space.

In the absence of a depiction of this ground, to assert its "presence" as a means of pictorial organization is to commit an act of faith. To ground the work in that way, one must seriously overdetermine the visual information provided. If this approach seems worth avoiding, at least provisionally, it is because Walker's removal of the ground is in effect what separates the inner plantation from the real one. It is how the tableaux's characters escape actual confusion with subjects located concretely in the world (of the sort that would say "Negress is Walker," or assert that the work *in itself* perpetuates the very stereotypes it analyzes). Too, it is how the tableaux escape the perjury charge so frequently

leveled at their "distortions" of the slaves' truths. It is how Walker's tableaux organize themselves into a strikingly appropriate way to depict a contemporary cultural landscape where the most pleasurable, terrifying, and consequential relations that occur between subjects do not take place on the ground at all. It specifies the tableaux's critique by grounding its object in the domain of the symbolic, in its generative "play of surfaces."

Not incidentally, the very ground that Walker puts into terminal crisis was, at one point, a staple in the romantic landscape's ideological program. In a discussion of that genre, Bermingham observes that John Constable, after finding his spirits "oppressed" by the mountains and lakes favored by other romantic painters, turned for inspiration to the varied and quotidian detail of everyday existence. Soon after, "certain spots of powerfully realized naturalistic detail [begin to] stand out."[77] For an example, Bermingham turns to *Dedham Vale: Morning* (1811; fig. 2.12), a panoramic view of an English valley, across whose foreground process such things as a milestone, a puddle, several farming animals, a farmer, a woman going to market and another on the road behind her:

> All these objects seem discontinuous... like so many unlinked vignettes. The first impression is one of fragments, but these fragments are ultimately meant to suggest and participate in a vast whole. A powerful horizontal sweep of bountiful cultivation grounds the details of both foreground and distance in a continuum that seems to exceed far beyond the lateral bounds of the canvas. Thus grounded, the apparent disorder of these details is retrieved in a greater order, of which the entire painting seems only a random sample. This greater order... guarantees the stability of the composition.[78]

2.12 John Constable, *Dedham Vale: Morning*, 1811. Oil on canvas, 31 × 51 in. Elton Hall Collection. Photo: Photographic Survey, Courtauld Institute of Art.

In her tableaux, Walker obliterates the "powerful sweep of bountiful cultivation," the very detail required to retrieve her vignettes for a greater narrative or symbolic order. So unmoored, the vignettes enjoy a kind of freedom to find their own means of contextualization. These we supply in electing to make use of Walker's handiwork, which in itself means no more or less than what it becomes in our varied (and, one hopes, varying) arguments about its utility. That we may supply *these scenes* with their terms of use, instead of having them supplied for us, would seem to be corroborated by the very element that tells us the grand has been withheld, not overlooked: the plantation house.

Known also as the "big house," "white house," "master's house," and "mammy's house" in later vernaculars, it recurs in Walker's tableaux as frequently as Negress herself and is perhaps the most charged of all of their scenographic elements. This house is regularly rendered at such a minuscule scale that the distance it marks seems to be internal to it—indisseverably linked to ideas of home in its broadest possible sense.[79] Because it is a magnetizing presence in the formal and metophoric structure of the tableau, the place of every other figure present in the scene will be determined by its location on the near side of an impassable rift between itself and that structure. In this way, the house is crucial for establishing the tableaux in their contemporaneity. Arguably the most durable and evocative synthetic icon in artistic and literary representations of slavery, the plantation house works within the tableaux as an object that is being misremembered *now*: it is the signal by which Walker's faux-historical counterculture of diversions from slavery conveys its estrangement from the institution and its nearness to us. Doubtless it is also one of the shrewdest means by which the tableaux at once invite and confound description, call for and deny an analysis "in terms of slavery."

It is not enough then to say that Walker cuts the ground out from under the literal hub of the institution. But that pictorial action *is* integral to the resultant political effect. Compared to the tableaux's counterparts in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plantation painting, such as the characteristic *Rose Hill*, an anonymous rendering of a South Carolina plantation painted around 1820, Walker's house is positioned at a considerably greater distance from the central activity.[80] It neither looms nor surveys, but serves the total effect of the landscape, as a *repoussoir* figure. Atypically, however, it is thrown from the sphere of action, rather than placed near it so as to approximate a precise distance, or render the scale, or give meaning and purpose to the compositional elements. In Walker's usage, it is an instrument of refusal directed at the policing function constraining the production of views of social relations (such as the present ones) that involve the crossing of entrenched property lines.

Thus, the defiant act of spatialization that this symbol commits against the flatness of the wall powerfully asserts the tableaux's presentism, an unfreezing of stopped time. Without the plantation house, it would be considerably harder for the historically derived caricatures to generate the illusion that their characters share a ground with us; but with it, the responsibility of grounding the composition literally lands at our feet. Because of its small scale, this figure is a less "charged spot" than the foregrounded action, and yet it performs a vital function in making that action evident as a barrier between the viewer and not a representation of the antebellum. The illusion thus created makes the frieze of activity a barrier between us and what is routinely taken to be Walker's subject. This obstructive function is reinforced by Walker's *not* using the background elements perspectivally, that is, her refusal to ensure that the elements in a tableau recede uniformly in space. The field

of action is a full stop; the sanitized image of decorous plantation life, the notion of any race in its proper place, simply beside the point.

I have forced the issues of sentimentalism and landscape in regard to Walker's tableaux for the exact reason that they bring her project into view as a form of strategic presentism that can only achieve itself through a distancing of certain prior imperative forms in a practice that systematically disarticulates them. In this respect, an observation by Charles Harrison on the importance of continuing to think landscape is extremely apposite here: "What may be of sharpest critical interest about the legacy of the genre of landscape... [are] the precedents that the genre provides for a continued engagement, in the context of the visible, with that which is contingently excluded from the possibility of being seen and represented."[81] The reason Walker empties the contents of the "inner plantation" is precisely to complicate a view of the landscape—painted, publicly witnessed, privately imagined, or otherwise represented—that would deny those contents their right of location in "a world that is not just a physical but a historical and ideological place—a kind of dreadful here and now."[82] The point, it seems, is to populate a picture of a past with events of subjectivity and desire and see what such a picture shows us about the present.

Obviously the tableaux themselves are as "obsessed" with slavery as are Walker's supporters and critics. But by stopping us on the way back to this perennial and problematic source, they treat the subject as a problem whose configuration will depend entirely on how one elects to take it up. The plantation's standing within the tableaux, as remote and even misremembered, articulates that the foreground is the present context. It is an art context, ever mindful of art's contrary-to-fact conditions.

Moreover, it should be clear that Walker's art is unrestrainedly, even aggressively, engaged with the fantastic. The notion that her work is sourced in an "inner plantation" most clearly states it is internally motivated, justified by and devoted to a purely ideational and philosophical end, albeit one with real implications for a sizable proportion of its viewers. In this respect her work engages in the process that Mikhail Bakhtin, in a 1963 study of Dostoyevsky, found crucial for the successful work of satire: "The creation of extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a *truth*, embodied in the image of... the seeker of this truth. We emphasize that the fantastic here serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, testing it."[83]

If Walker's tableaux offer testimony, it is as a means to individuate, not substantiate, a prospect that is in itself both mobile and quite capacious. The apposite analogy is to the adjudication, in court, of differing ways to perceive an isolated problem. When a witness succeeds in introducing reasonable doubt, she effectively distorts the truth function, in that context, of what for another party is an unvarying prospect, a matter of certain agreement. A disputation thus moves into the place formerly occupied by the problem. An opening replaces a closing; as Derrida writes, "There is, in sum, in this place of aporia, no longer any problem. Not that... the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem which would constitute itself and that one could keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute."[84] Walker's tableaux situate us in just such a place of aporia. They figure the space between disputants and their problems as a space of politics and desire, one consisting at all times of a shifting ground and a selection among possibilities. And for whom among us is "What could be?" not the most urgent of questions?

3
Fantasias of the Museum

When Fred Wilson came to installation art in the late 1980s, he was a midcareer artist, trained as a sculptor. After a number of years supporting himself with jobs as a guard, curator, and freelance educator in museums, he decided to turn the focus of his practice to aspects of these institutions that he found wanting.[1] Reading James Clifford's landmark 1988 study *The Predicament of Culture* had left a particular impression. Clifford's study of converging definitions of "culture," and specifically the ways they position their most privileged objects in relation to others, appealed to Wilson's diasporic sensibilities and became a touchstone for his thinking about the Western museum's disposition toward both the "non-West" and the cultural minorities more local to it.[2] Wilson concluded that "Ethnographic displays create a distance between cultures that doesn't need to be there. This difference cuts off any connections and flattens out the complexity of our relations."[3] He began to consider what it would mean to make art that collapsed that distance and reestablished those connections. The material results of Wilson's ongoing investigation can thus far be divided into two categories. The

first involves the detailed fabrication of museum-like arrangements of objects. The second mode—exemplified by his *Mining the Museum*, a 1992–93 reinstallation of the third-floor galleries at the Maryland Historical Society—entails the modification of preexisting spaces in actual institutions, wherein Wilson enters the scenario with the understanding that every transformable element in a given context is fair game. These elements must be accessible to him (whether on display or not, whether "art" or not) because the museum itself, it has been said, is Wilson's medium. He works with not only its structure and categories but all the space it demarcates and everything in it. The first part of the present discussion considers the degree to which the idea of the museum conditions and informs what remains Wilson's defining work in the latter mode, *Mining the Museum*, establishing the repertoire of gestures possible within it and thereby setting its limits.

In his earliest work, mostly executed in the first mode, Wilson focused on fabricating objects of his own invention. He created freestanding installations and sculptural programs from materials, and in configurations, representative of how display determines art objects. Then Wilson arranged them in specially dressed spaces, as do museums on a larger scale. These works propose agendas of alternative (and unlikely) possibility for the museum, articulating unwritten narratives of the sometimes iniquitous events that make possible but are anesthetized by museums' static representations of culture. They imaginatively render unto the museum the capacity to account for the kinds of action needed to establish cultural authority; to bear out, as if confessionally, the particular stories that shore up its rhetorical foundation. No longer a bazaar where Western civilization proudly legitimizes its own art and culture's highest and most hegemonic ideals, Wilson's mock museums make visible relations of power, not just relations of meaning, and integrate these into the larger institutional story told.[4] In this way, and be-

cause Wilson maintained a variance from project to project, his early museology conceptualizes the museum as a form of action instead of a finished achievement.

From 1988 to 1992, Wilson filled these faux museum galleries with borrowed artwork, high-quality reproductions, items from his own collection, and store-bought goods. The first and largest such installation, *Rooms with a View: The Struggle between Culture, Content, and the Context of Art* (1988; fig. 3.1), occupied three rooms at a Bronx gallery that Wilson was directing at the time.[3] To create it, the artist borrowed artworks and distributed them among the rooms according to type: a crowded and heavily documented ethnographic gallery, "The Ethnographic Museum"; a well-appointed and thickly hung salon, "The Turn-of-the-Century Salon"; and a spare modern art gallery, "The White Box." Wilson created three powerful, but also shifting and opposed, senses of ambience in which viewers could read the distinct interpretive style honored in each configuration: fetishized, stylized, and rarefied. To observe the differences among these types while also feeling their divergent ways of positioning viewers vis-à-vis objects—knowing all the while that each was a subset of the same deconstructive operation—hurled the viewer into an awareness of the falsely neutral formal conventions of museum settings themselves. Indeed, in that moment of awareness, it was open to question whether one was a viewer or a self-conscious witness of museum discourse at work—a condition that an undisturbed conception of the "the viewer" precisely forecloses. Wilson's confabulations of vocabularies of display shifted the basis of viewer experience from continuity to radical discontinuity, inserting a strangeness at the heart of an experience many of us prize for its tranquil familiarity.

Following *Rooms with a View*, Wilson exercised his critical analysis of museum languages in smaller, more focused projects. These drew

3.1 Fred Wilson, *Rooms with a View: The Struggle between Culture, Content, and the Context of Art*, 1988. Mixed media. Detail: "The Turn-of-the-Century Salon." Installation view, Longwood Arts Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

attention to the museum's inability to account fully for change or historical and cultural specificity within its synoptic, narrative framework. Such works were particularly adept at showing how the museum's organizational logic at times uncannily resembles colonialism's by placing under evasive differences that might prove inhospitable to "mission," and "utter[ing] an archaic colonial 'otherness,' speaking in riddles, obliterating proper names and proper places."[6] By the time Wilson opened *Panta Rhei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art* in 1992 (fig. 3.2), his viewpoint on the museum's selective historicism and unreflective culturalism had become at once more pointed and more topical. *Panta Rhei*, Greek for "all things in flux," was more deftly compositional and evocative of the sculptural practice in which Wilson had trained, and reflected the expanded scope of his methodology. For *Panta Rhei*, Wilson painted a space the pale shade of blue traditionally reserved for the display of antiquities and filled it with white plaster casts of classical Greek sculpture, most on pedestals. Wilson interspersed the casts among smaller reproductions of Egyptian sculpture in plaster and terracotta colored gray and black. This last gesture addressed the formation of the dominant art historical concepts "ancientness" and "classicalness" as pointedly Greek. More importantly, it repositioned those concepts as expressive of the cross-cultural encounters, with North Africa among other places, that necessitated their solidification but are eviscerated in common usage. Wilson nestled among all these sculptures an Atlas figure that, rather than supporting its characteristic globe, labors under a pile of Western art history survey texts while standing upon a number of books on non-Western subjects, including one on African art. As Lois Nesbitt wrote, "We all know by now that European and American art historians have stacked the cards heavily in favor of the classical tradition at the expense of African and Far Eastern cultures . . . [but] in Wilson's sculpture, the Western tomes supplant the globe: they

3.2 Fred Wilson, *Panta Rhei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art*, 1992. Mixed media. Installation view, Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein. ALSO PLATE 4.

are the world we have been taught."[7] Wilson conveyed this lesson in reverse in a nearby work, which sees the head of a decapitated, white Artemis figure forcefully replaced by that of Bast, an Egyptian cat goddess, whose myth was likely the source of Artemis's own (fig. 3.3).

Dotting the scene with Artemis's severed head and scattering plaster debris on the floor, Wilson staged a kind of violent restitution of the order that was upset to establish the classical one. Indeed, between the strewn plaster and the off-balancing effect of the overstuffed pedestals and numerous headless, bodiless, or otherwise incomplete figures, *Panta Rhei* demanded that the viewer negotiate the space physically. This gave force to the real-world resonance of Wilson's symbolic actions. For Wilson understated the import of his installation when he described it as "a discussion about the classical history of Western civilization and how it was shifted by early-nineteenth-century and eighteenth-century prejudices about the world."[8] With the word "shift" Wilson also remarked a more immediate transformation under way as litigious contemporary disputes arose over the rightful ownership of both antiquity as an idea and the physical artifacts associated with it. No doubt, cognizance of these disputes may have increased some viewers' sense of disorientation and unease in *Panta Rhei*'s already nervous-making setting. In this way *Panta Rhei* transcended mere visual museology to become political art in the deepest sense: both topical and concisely expressive of a real-time conflict raging outside its frame.

Panta Rhei represents an important advance in Wilson's practice, in requiring viewers literally to negotiate the matter as well as the subject of the installation, and to engage the altogether real currency of its content. More, it centered its action on radically altering the context of, and in some cases destroying, the very pedagogical instruments—the busts commonly used as models in drawing classes; the survey texts—by means of which old models might persist unrevised. By moving among

3.3 Fred Wilson, *Panta Rhei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art*, 1992. Mixed media. Detail: *Artemis/Bast*. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

these different levels of interpretation and critique, *Panta Rhei* injected these "ancient" scenes with an unflinching contemporaneity, thereby showing the representation of culture to be a dynamic, productive social force by becoming one itself.[9]

Following *Panta Rhei,* Wilson began to work by commission in actual museums. Many of these projects have seen the artist reimagine museums against themselves by temporarily introducing disorienting changes into their midst, some subtle and some dramatic. Wilson has relocated, unearthed, and reaccented collection materials and environmental features in order to put institutional, and often institution-specific, conventions into critical perspective. This has involved everything from object placement, to the voices of museum labels and tours, to lighting and encasement protocols. For instance, as part of *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors,* a 1993 project at the Seattle Art Museum, Wilson activated an incidental passageway by aiming an overhead light at a water fountain; in another location, he placed a cleaning cart on a pedestal in the middle of a paintings gallery.[10] The point of this second mode of installation, it seems, has been to show that even the slightest departure from the museum's prevailing order can jostle viewers into an alertness to the prior and total rationalization of all its functions, spaces, and holdings. While Wilson has completed a number of projects in this vein, I will focus the present discussion on *Mining the Museum* because the exhibition sought to apply this strategy with citywide relevance, to respond through the Maryland Historical Society to contemporary conditions in Baltimore, as home to some of this country's most infamous and stressful race antagonism.[11] As American cities go, Baltimore is one of the most "loaded" with respect to Wilson's concern with the institutionalization of differences. The city's history reflects, to many, an ambivalence about race that is endemic to its geographic circumstances. For Baltimore is a border city in a border state, and the elites who formed

its culture-historical base in the nineteenth century comprised both northern abolitionists and proslavery interests politically oriented to the South. Not talking about race, it is often said, has long been a precondition of peace in the city. With *Mining the Museum,* then, Wilson proposed to do just that.

First it is necessary to familiarize ourselves with the language of intervention that Wilson's 1992 installation used. Wilson has insisted that he grew his institutional critique out of his own experience working at various levels of the museum profession during the 1980s but nowhere finding his heritage reflected to his satisfaction. Importantly, this same period saw the emergence of many distinct critical visions of art institutions, some rooted in the ambience of multiculturalism and mobilized from within existing institutional frameworks. In this respect the reclamatory aspect of Wilson's project bears the marks of a larger project fomented in a period many will remember by "The Decade Show": the international conversation generated in response to "Into the Heart of Africa" at the Royal Ontario Museum, which made a flagging attempt to address Canada's contributions to colonialism; and the 1991 and especially 1993 Whitney Biennials, which became so much lion fodder for conservative critics who imagine cultural diversity and cultural advancement to be definitionally unrelated pursuits.[12] Yet despite Wilson's understandable reluctance to reduce his work to its precedents and the relative newness of interventionary multiculturalism, we cannot overlook the historical fact that the institutions of art had been subjected to trenchant critique for years, albeit with little focus on their specifically ethnographic, race-hierarchizing functions.[13] In important ways, Wilson's work reorients formal, rhetorical, and conceptual actions already performed, and attention to the broader arc of its antecedents and contemporaries can only bring his work more sharply into focus.[14]

PLATE 1 Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 15 × 35 ft. Deitch Projects, New York. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (Left half shown at top, right half at bottom.)

PLATE 2 Theodor Kaufmann, *On to Liberty*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 36 × 56 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Erving and Joyce Wolf. 1982.443.3.

PLATE 3 Kara Walker, *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, yet We Pressed On)*, 2000. Detail. Projection, cut paper, and adhesive on wall, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2000.68. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

PLATE 4 Fred Wilson, *Panta Rhei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art*, 1992. Mixed media. Installation view, Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

PLATE 5 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992–93. Mixed media. Installation view, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. Detail: paintings gallery. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

PLATE 6 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992–93. Mixed media. Detail: "Cabinetmaking, 1820–1960." Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

PLATE 7 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Still: Melvin Van Peebles with his wax double. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

PLATE 8 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Van Peebles with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. *Baltimore Series: Déjà vu*, 2003. Three color photographs, 39¼ × 44 in. (left and right images), 39¼ × 49¼ in. (center image). Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

PLATE 9 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988. Oilstick on canvas, 40 × 25 in. Collection and courtesy the artist.

myriad pulsations generated by minute surface changes give rise to an overwhelming chromatic sensation. The all-pervading impression is intensified by the field effect, the environmental size of the pictures, and the illusion of atmosphere generated by the thinly coated color. The subtly stained and blotted modulations of color that dematerialize both surfaces and contours transform the rectangular planes into blocks of colored ether. The blurring of the edges prevents the shapes from hardening and dislodges them, causing them to hover outward, enveloping the viewer in the luminous aura they radiate. Conversely, the rectangles also seem to recede, turning into layers of veils that shroud some mysterious presence that one is made to feel is there and to which one must penetrate. As one does in suspenseful reverie, one feels drawn into vast apparitional spaces that threaten to dissolve both the viewer and his world. At the same time the frontal parallel patterns accentuate the picture plane and counteract the sense of depth, preventing the surface from vaporizing too much. Although each eroded rectangle is dis-

PLATE 10 Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 1993. Oilstick on linen, 80 × 62 in. Collection and courtesy the artist.

Niggers be holding them dicks too..
White people go "Why you guys hold
your things?"
Say "You done took everything else
motherfucker."

PLATE 11 Glenn Ligon, *Cocaine (Pimps)*, 1993. Oilstick and acrylic on linen, 32 × 32 in. Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York. Courtesy Fisher Landau Center for Art.

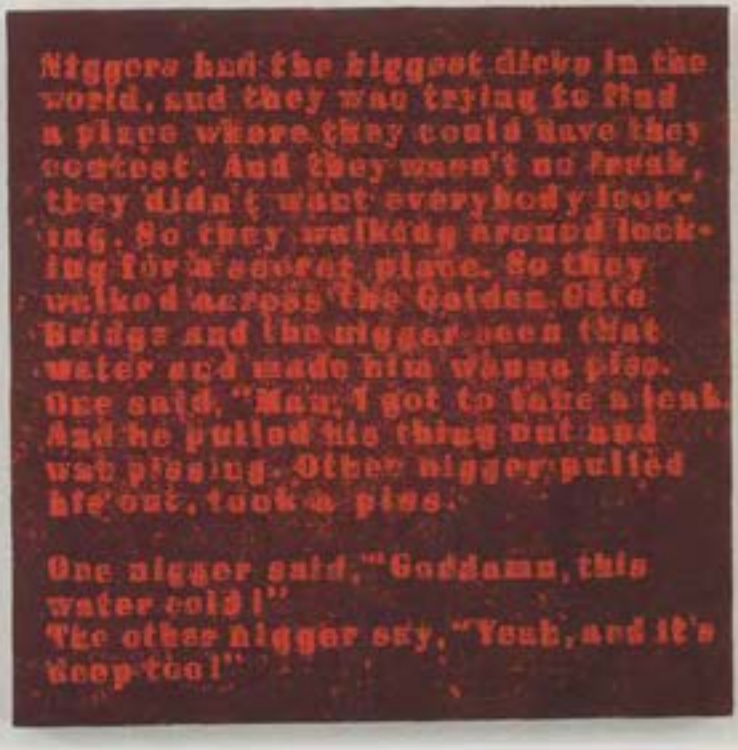

Niggers had the biggest dicks in the world, and they was trying to find a place where they could have they contest. And they wasn't no freak, they didn't want everybody looking. So they walking around looking for a secret place. So they walked across the Golden Gate Bridge and the nigger seen that water and made him wanna piss. One said, "Man, I got to take a leak." And he pulled his thing out and was pissing. Other nigger pulled his out, took a piss.
One nigger said, "Goddamn, this water cold!"
The other nigger say, "Yeah, and it's deep too!"

PLATE 12 Glenn Ligon, *Mudbone (Liar)*, 1993. Oilstick and acrylic on linen, 32 × 32 in. Collection Raymond J. McGuire, New York.

PLATE 13 Glenn Ligon, *More Bitch Than Me #1*, 2004. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 32 × 32 in.

PLATE 14 William Pope.L, *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, 2001–ongoing. Performance, New York. View: Broadway at Reade Street. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Pruznick/Grey.

PLATE 15 William Pope.L, *Times Square Crawl*, 1978 (part of *Meditation Square Pieces*). Performance, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ellen LaForge.

PLATE 16 William Pope.L, *Tompkins Square Crawl*, 1991. Performance, New York. View: street. Courtesy the artist. Photo: James Pruznick.

PLATE 17 William Pope.L, *Thunderbird Immolation*, 1978 (part of *Meditation Square Pieces*). Performance, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ellen LaForge.

PLATE 18 William Pope.L, *ATM Piece*, 1997. Performance, New York. View: patron. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Lydia Grey.

Since at least the late 1960s, the museum and its distance from the grain of sociopolitical life have been generative subjects for large numbers of conceptual, performance, and multimedia artists wishing to be seen to "generate a legitimate opinion independently of the institution."[13] This art shared the theoretical premise that, as cultural authorities vested to represent the past to the present and the present to itself, these institutions purchase their authority at very real costs to the variously constituted publics they ostensibly serve. Thus when museums became viable subjects for art, the stress frequently fell upon their function as organs for the reproduction of material and conceptual frameworks of culture, and what became known as institutional critique often entailed a flouting of traditional aesthetic categories now viewed as complicit with that reproductive process. This functioning was seen to reflect and affect everything from the appearance and representation of artistic creation itself (e.g., Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* [1941], Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* [1969–72], Mel Bochner's *Measurements* [from 1969]), to notions of where art was possible and where it was supposed not to be (Robert Smithson's nonsites, Daniel Buren's contribution to the 1968 Salon de Mai), to private institutions' imbrication with civic processes (e.g., Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll* [1970]). The difficulty of exiting the art economy altogether led many to confront the "institutional frame" by illuminating it from within. Bochner's *Measurements*, for instance, appeared in galleries, but, in marking the literal parameters of spaces and objects in inches and feet (units derived from the body), disposed themselves in a vigorously unartlike way: they accented the grammar of relations that the transcendent experience of art must suspend. Others, such as Smithson and Buren, took up positions both within and outside institutional space, thus thematizing the span that disjoins them as itself institutional. Buren for instance

sited his 1968 project at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, hiring men to pace the sidewalk wearing sandwichboards onto which Buren pasted his (now) trademark striped paper, which he had also installed inside the city museum.

Some artists view maintaining proximity to the institution or its conventions as integral to rigorous institutional critique. Broodthaers, Buren, and Haacke, in important works dating from the late 1960s, articulated critical positions either from within the museum or by holding fast to it—or perhaps to the museum-like—as a formal and conceptual vocabulary through which to articulate its specifically social functions, and thereby to underline the discursivity that is peculiar and essential to the museum and brilliantly sublimated in its most common procedures.[35] More recently, durational works and installations attached or referring to particular sites, by neoconceptualists such as Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, and others, have broached the problem of museological classification. These works have focused institutional critique differently by repositioning categories of culture—such as race, gender, work, class, and nation—as well as institutional education and entertainment genres as analytic frameworks rather than mediums of knowledge. Much of this more recent work interrogates the social arrangements reflected in, or implied by, standard museum protocols, approaching philosophies and methodologies of collecting—concretized in presentational schemes deciding what and how objects are arrayed, revealed, and encountered—as readable models of social thought. These works are "later" than their conceptualist predecessors' in another respect that makes them important background for Wilson's projects at Baltimore: they privilege the category of experience. Deriving central components of their methodologies from what they bring to the institution—as a naturalist, say, or a black person or a feminist—they

represent difference as a fact (and a topic) repressed within typical museum functioning. At its best, this work reveals the kinetic operation of categories within the chilling stillness of conventional museological thinking; it does not simply remind us that difference exists, it discloses the means of its constitution in relations and language.[17]

Ostensibly, such projects draw attention to the constitutive outsides of institutions of art, insinuating "live" politics in sites where, if it manifests at all, it does so as archived (valorized) or deadened, or streamlined into celebrations of difference for its own sake (theatricalized). The ever-increasing fiscal necessity that museums position themselves as public institutions equally topical to all segments of their respective populations only heightens the importance of testing the quality of their claims according to the circumstances that actually surround them. A 1982 work by Hans Haacke is exemplary in this respect. Haacke's *Oelgemaelde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* (figs. 3.4, 3.5), created for Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany, consisted of an oil painting of then–U.S. President Ronald Reagan closed off by stanchions with a velvet rope and situated at the end of a red carpet runner, at the opposite end of which Haacke installed a mural-sized photograph of a political demonstration. It was precisely Haacke's point that the photograph needed its physical enormity in order to compromise even slightly the force of aesthetic-discursive tradition signaled by the gilt-framed portrait and ceremonial trappings and articulated as political by association with Reagan's painted image. The radical disproportion between the two sides of the installation physically underscored its more symbolic messages. For Haacke's photograph, which depicted German demonstrators protesting Reagan's recent appearance in Kassel to express his country's gratitude to the Germans for housing part of its nuclear arsenal, not only confronted painting with photomechanical reproduction but analogized

3-4 Hans Haacke, *Oelgemaelde. Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers*, 1982. Detail. Mixed media. Installation view, Documenta 7, Kassel. Courtesy the artist. Copyright ARS (Artists' Rights Society).

3.5 Hans Haacke, *Oelgemaelde. Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers*, 1982. Detail. Courtesy the artist. Copyright ARS (Artists' Rights Society).

this antagonism to an incipient one between competing constituencies in the German state. As Douglas Crimp explained,

> Not only did Haacke insert into this [exhibition] context a reminder of actual historical conditions, but he also reflected on the terms of current aesthetic debates. . . . But more important than these debates, Haacke's *Oelgemaelde* suggested to the viewer that the relevant history of the town of Kassel was closer than the one to which Documenta's artistic director [Rudi Fuchs, who had sought "to locate Documenta within the grand tradition of the eighteenth century"] constantly made reference. . . . Haacke's work might thus have evoked for Documenta's visitors not Kassel's glorious eighteenth-century past but its precarious present.[18]

By rendering the interconnection of the immediate political situation and the artwork's historical specificity, *Oelgemaelde* made palpable tensions from which Documenta officials had hoped their exhibition would provide an escape (in the form of the simple explanation: "Our culture suffers from an illusion of the media," as Fuchs put it at the time).[19]

Like Haacke's installation, Wilson's projects reflect the currents of the same aesthetic and academic conversations that they ultimately enter. And, as do the works of Broodthaers and Green, Wilson's understanding of the museum's cultural history bears the deep impress of the institution's relevance for colonization projects and other geopolitically consequential fruits of the consolidation of power-knowledge that animated modernity.[20] I make these modal comparisons neither to diminish key differences among these practices nor to locate a particular derivativeness at the heart of Wilson's practice. To the contrary, situating Wilson's approach in this way shows how he redirected the insights

attained in earlier work in ways befitting his appreciably distinctive priorities. Wilson's ability to locate traces of power relationships that might otherwise remain hidden or to pinpoint the artificiality, within the museum's structures of natural progression—by simply shifting the stresses of the statements already on hand—distinguishes his work from much of the institutional critique that preceded it. Surely another of his accomplishments certain to endure is the simple fact that, were it not for the success of Wilson's interventions, institutional critique itself might not yet have turned so fully to face the nexus of problems that race difference raises in institutions of art. Likewise, it might not have developed the (to a political artist, enviable) problem of needing now to reevaluate its relationship to a new kind of "postmodernist museum," whose public performance now includes a regular schedule of invitations whose very structure as repeated, compulsive performances indicates that the pressure is felt but precisely not taken to be a cause for thorough self-examination. Still another source of Wilson's work's value is the effect of its much-debated didacticism: for by enabling visitors to isolate and examine the rhetorics of marginalization, subordination, and exclusion that organize the museum, Wilson's projects have let them see for themselves how the institution does and does not answer to the differences brought to it by visitors.

An important difficulty remains, however. The practice of reading specific museums for and then calling out for display repressed, native inscriptions of differences—especially those kept in place through scopic regimes, as race and gender are—risks promulgating such differences in a legibility, or clarity, that is both consistent with most extant institutional procedures and at odds with modes of living *as* different. All an institution has to do to claim responsibility for difference is to make a place (in the gallery, the collection, the board rolls, the exhibition schedule) for a force that will clarify its special character simply by

being manifest, at last, in a site that had absented it. The institution's relationship to the differential relations that comprise it, demarked or perhaps "confessed" but completely untransformed, and the integrity of the power these relations continually establish are never put into question. Because they bring the issue to a level of specificity at which the museum's abstractions are particularly dangerous, matters concerning particular locales and specific museums' appeals to "public responsibility" require a critique detailed enough to account for the singularities and differences that constitute publics and communities.[21] As Miwon Kwon has warned, in too many of these cases, "the community is primarily defined in opposition to the forces of an oppressive dominant culture that would regulate and diffuse the efforts of those who seek greater participation. . . . This focus on the oppositional character of a community supports the habitual tendency . . . to think of the 'community' as a synonym for social groups of the marginal or underprivileged classes."[22]

This is precisely the challenge that Wilson faced with *Mining the Museum*. I want to consider this installation in terms of the tension that arose between institutional statements that presented it as an exhibition for the citizens of Baltimore and the images of culture and transformational possibility that the installation itself projected.[23] I contend that if we are to take seriously its claims to interrogate "commonly held definitions of 'museum,' 'history,' 'exhibition,' 'curator,' 'artist,' 'audience,' 'community,' and 'collaboration,'" then we must also seriously evaluate what kind of statements *Mining the Museum* offered to those Baltimoreans whose histories' vanishing by the institution Wilson sought to reverse.[24] How were black and Native American audiences entering the Maryland Historical Society knowing that "'another' story was being told inside" expected to think the difference between *that* story and the irreducibly specific ones that large numbers of them surely already knew

from their lived experiences? The main difference, of course, is that the story on offer at the MHS was only one version—Wilson's—of their stories, but that difference *could not be seen to make a difference* without severely limiting the project's reach. The very logic of *Mining* depends on the conflation of a single, privileged experience, recounted in the catalogue and discussed below, with an institutionally derived, general conception not only of community but of the representational demands "it" would make on the MHS if given the opportunity.

Mining the Museum made legible the racism implicit in the Maryland Historical Society's view of the population. In this way, the installation answered a leading concern for those situated in and around the city of Baltimore, whose starkly divisive race relations were made starker in recent decades by growing numbers of severely disenfranchised blacks, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. This situation created a certain pressure for Wilson to use *Mining*, in his words, to "root out the denial" that had left him with "a kind of tension in my body" when he had first visited the MHS.[25] According to the project's organizers, the task was to marshal an "other viewpoint" on Maryland history,[26] and audience research was central to the year-long residency Wilson undertook in preparation for the show: "What was important to me was that I wasn't going to understand what the Historical Society was about unless I spoke to the community in Baltimore. . . . I don't just go into a community and say, 'There it is. Now you have to figure it out.'"[27] Wilson said that this familiarization process was difficult because "Baltimore was, for me, really the nineteenth century. I was going through [the MHS's collection of] manumission papers, the logs of slaves, and the letters . . . but I was also struck by the wealth that was there. Seeing the juxtaposition of those things was really painful."[28]

With *Mining*, Wilson made concrete the acute consciousness of difference that contemporary Baltimore had provoked for him. How,

then, did this manifest in the installation? What kind of image of interventionary politics is *Mining?* Given the installation's temporariness and site specificity, to speculate about such things is of course to ask a great deal of the images and anecdotes that are all that remain of it. But these materials are rich with insights into how *Mining* addressed the problem of conceptualizing marginalized communities and representing them to themselves from within a museum framework.[29]

An image-based reading of *Mining* also agrees fundamentally with the experience one might have had visiting it. The installation worked as an image on several levels, moving viewers through a series of densely symbolic vignettes, one at a time, as they approached and entered the MHS, proceeded to its third floor, and crossed the floor from one side to the other. The first two of these vignettes—a red, green, and black Black Nationalist flag hanging outside the MHS and a video "signature" by the artist that greeted visitors in the lobby—were prefatory gestures preparing visitors for the third-floor installation. For the organizers, the flag was intended not to state Wilson's or the exhibition's politics, but rather to announce "to 'other' audiences that 'another' history was now being told inside."[30] Already the course of the installation was posited as an alternative to the MHS's own narrative, rather than a consideration of the "other" as *at all times* a determining presence *within* Maryland's self-understanding. The staggering confusion of priorities here—welcome the new audience, assuage the old one, and be sure weary travelers can orient quickly to the purely experimental nature of the event—right at the top of the score—was given different expression in Wilson's televised signature. This component isolated his perspective still more completely; indeed, the literature explains it as assuring visitors that the views expressed in *Mining* were Wilson's own. In the video, Wilson affably addresses viewers with statements about the subjectivism of museum displays: "Whether they admit it or not,

curators bring who they are to the creation of exhibitions," he says at one point. Later he invites his audience to look upon museums in general as "a place where anything can happen," and one that should "make you think, [make] you question."[51] Wilson's "signature" did significant work, although it is seldom remarked in considerations of *Mining*. Two aspects of this work need remarking here. First, Wilson affirms "who he is" in a way that counterposes an individual essence, meant to be seen as black, to an institutional essence correspondingly understood as white. This not only essentializes his position but imputes to it an institutional or collective scope within which black disputants are unimaginable; in short, it secures representativeness for an experience whose specificity will be seen subsequently to matter in only the most superficial of ways.

Second, Wilson's signature can claim this authenticity precisely and only because the museum is good enough to recognize it—its beneficence being what makes it the spontaneous, egalitarian, mind-ennobling place that Wilson describes. Partly because of its thinly personal element, *Mining* depended a great deal on Wilson's success in conveying specific metaphorical images of previously unseen relations to viewers. In these images, the "other" viewers were invited to find points of identification. By showing them that they had always had a place in the MHS, if only as an abiding absence, they made the museum "theirs" as much as (in fact, just like) Wilson had made it his.

Thus, in an early gallery dimly lit and hung with paintings—three of which included black figures in marginal or subservient positions—Wilson illuminated the figures with spotlights and hung labels asking leading questions on their behalf: "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where did I go? What do I dream?" (fig. 3.6). More didactic than the scenes that would follow, this arrangement effectively revealed Wilson's interrogative methodology, a mode of critiquing the institution that

3.6 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992–93. Mixed media. Installation view, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. Detail: paintings gallery. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein. ALSO PLATE 5.

inverts its standpoint and then phrases as questions what the dominant culture would issue as declaratives. Most striking about this outcome is the stability upon which it depends, at whose preservation it seems to direct the bulk of its critical interest. The majority of the vignettes were more complex, but none could be described as unstable. Indeed, as Wilson stated, he intended to steady precarious balances like the one that overtook him when he first arrived.

Upon arriving on the third floor, viewers first encountered a large silver trophy globe emblazoned with the word "Truth" and set in a vitrine surrounded with several empty Plexiglas mounts (fig. 3.7). Six marble pedestals flanked this setup, three white ones placed to the right and three black to the left. Atop the white pedestals rested the portrait busts of three men whom the context would suggest were significant personages in state lore. In fact, as wall labels informed viewers, they are Napoleon Bonaparte (whose brother Jérôme's son left collections to the Society), Andrew Jackson, and Henry Clay—none of whom ever lived in Maryland.[32] In contrast, the three black pedestals supported nothing, but their labels name Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman—all Marylanders whose images appear nowhere in the MHS collection. This opening vignette relied on viewers' nearly assured recognition of the indispensability of Banneker, Douglass, and Tubman for Maryland history. Because the white figures belong to a familiar and rather standard type of genealogy, the question of their belonging is superfluous: they belong by fiat. The practice of collecting itself was on display, not as a generalized form of engaging culture possessively but as a deliberative and exclusionary process of state identity formation. In Wilson's modification, the MHS collection announced itself as a representative personification of Maryland's historical culture. Its tendencies of collection and display, the viewer learned, both enacted and denied social recognitions, rationalized identifications, and even erased the

3.7 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992–93. Mixed media. Detail: pedestals. Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

evidence of certain lives according to the prevailing, indeed the founding, racial logic of its native context.

Clearly the arrangement of these sculptures and pedestals for the show forced back upon the MHS questions begged by the lack of proportionate representation for the state's racial minorities. (Somewhat less clearly, it allowed the MHS *to be seen* confronting such questions.) Elsewhere, *Mining* accomplished this questioning with the startling force of key presences established by Wilson's excavation (or "mining," in the sense of the title) from the basement of objects previously deemed unfit for public viewing.[33] Some of the most dramatic of these evidenced a significant black presence at the MHS, though in nearly every instance it is marked by subordination and outright exclusion.

An area titled "Metalwork, 1793–1880" included a vitrine containing metal household items (fig. 3.8). Nearby, a nondescript gray-and-white-painted wooden dollhouse was mounted on a pedestal. The theme of this vignette was the life of the black domestic laborer in the house of Maryland culture, though this is hardly disclosed by its title, itself a comment on the domesticating breadth of museological categorizing practices. Inside the vitrine, Wilson had neatly arrayed a gleaming silver tea service and set of beverage cups to surround a crudely forged, darkly patinated manacle. The setup makes the sharp tactile contrasts seem pat, until the social imagination personifies the arrangement. One then realizes that Wilson has carefully blocked the scene to evoke both a servicing action ("Your tea...") and the server's violent besiegement. The closed dollhouse nearby emboldened this image of hemming in, serving simultaneously as a kind prison for the black-faced figurine of a domestic laborer standing in the living room (seemingly at a loss) and as "home" for the small black dog who sits obediently beside its master, a plastic statuette of a white boy. The implicit dialogue between these cast-metal objects, intimate and discomfiting, is somewhat contextualized

3.8 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992–93. Mixed media. Detail: "Metalwork, 1793–1880." Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.

but more precisely determined by the dates given in the vignette's title ("Metalwork, 1793–1880"), as 1793 saw the introduction of the first anti-slavery legislation and 1880 the abolition of slavery in Cuba, the institution's last official stronghold. The dollhouse's context, then, is the abolition of an institution that continued to speak through apparently benign cultural forms despite its formal dissolution.

A few galleries later, viewers encountered another well-known arrangement, "Cabinetmaking, 1820–1960," which occupied a blood-red gallery. Here, Wilson's arrangement desublimated the image of enforced subservience by dramatically evoking scenes of the pursuit, capture, and eventual punishment of (poor) blacks by their (rich, white) oppressors. The most striking image was a hunting rifle mounted high on a pedestal, its barrel aimed at a group of mallard decoys flanking a wooden Zouave puppet (a racist caricature in a type of garb inspired by elite Algerian troops and later adapted to uniform an eccentric Civil War regiment).[34] Like metalwork, cabinetmaking is a slightly old-fashioned genericism, but for woodcraft—a category that includes thing from decoys and puppets to punt guns and paper. In Wilson's usage, "cabinetmaking" emphasized by ironic understatement the brutality of the actions implied. Behind the rifle hung eight reproductions of runaway slave posters. Wilson guided viewers' reading of these posters by using raised, printed slivers of foam core to highlight, or target, passages revealing the compounding rhetorical violences of the posters themselves: "Leg which is a little crooked from having once been broken"; "lump or mark on his shin occasioned by a kick" are two examples of the descriptions slave masters gave their human property. At the other end of the same room, Wilson figured the culmination of the slave hunt: there sat four nineteenth-century Victorian chairs upon pedestals arrayed to face what the catalogue describes as "Baltimore's whipping post," gifted to the MHS by the City Jail Board in 1963 (fig. 3.9). While one is accustomed to seeing

3.9 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992–93. Mixed media. Detail: "Cabinetmaking, 1820–1960." Courtesy the artist and Pace Wildenstein.
ALSO PLATE 6.

empty or taped-off chairs in museums, seeing the whipping post is all the more harrowing when one visualizes the very different kinds of person to which the post and chairs are suited. In this arrangement, the drama of the post becomes the supplement to the chairs that restores both to a social function within a specific relation of power, yet in restaging lynching as a kind of living-room leisure sport, Wilson's arrangement draws this practice into direct correlation with those others implied in the dollhouse and the "Metalwork" vitrine. The dark poetry of the whipping post as proscenium gave this section the feel of a perverse luxury, a kind of "grand" finale to measures taken by more direct means elsewhere in the room such as guns and slave hunts. Moreover, since none of the objects exceeds the category "cabinetmaking," Wilson's spectacle made a show of play inside the conservational protocols that manage objects and themes within the institutional order.

These gestures go beyond merely revealing the support that diversely categorized things lend to the messaging and enforcement functions of categories themselves. They establish "home" as a simultaneously capacious and airless symbology that is also indispensable to the MHS's public function, regardless of whose story is being told. Wilson's reconfiguration of the dollhouse evokes this patently by exposing it as an ideological toy from whose proper engagement lessons in domination and subordination can be learned. The uneasy, quotidian charm of the genre scene between the tea service and the manacle makes a similar point. *Mining*'s most powerful reconnoitering of the home trope, however, is achieved in "Cabinetmaking." Chairs don't age like dollhouses or iron; nor do they project preciousness in the manner of silver sets or well-conserved old papers. Rather, as mere chairs, haphazardly arranged, their aura is that of the domestic familiar, which lends Wilson's arrangement the uncanny feel of a setting for an after-hours diversion. These

suggestions work in concert with the chairs' siting in a state historical society to extend the notion of home to the state, to state identity, and most eerily, to the totality of depicted or implied relations those formations include, *now*. The categories themselves—painting, metalwork, cabinetmaking, and others—were but convenient epistemological frameworks in which to model the larger predicament identified, though not problematized, by *Mining*: that is, the election of a single, simple relational dynamic—white/nonwhite, or dominant/oppressed—in which to "provide a strategy for the audience to reclaim the terrain of the museum for itself."[35] What Ira Berlin writes in the catalogue is true: "'Metalwork . . .' makes clear that the history of American Indians, Africans, and Europeans can never be understood in isolation from each other. Wilson explores this conjunction by a close examination of the ubiquitous violence that has informed relations among American Indians, Africans, Europeans, and their descendants from the beginning of Maryland's history."[36] But the most creative actions Wilson committed in creating *Mining* showed, did not "examine," these violences. Likewise they did not see violences as "informing" relations but defining them, establishing their limits if not their very possibility. What were audiences to take away from the reinstallation that they didn't already know? The kinds of cultural conjunction that *Mining* modeled, the sort of dwelling it temporarily became for that "other audience," did little more than reaffirm the not unreasonable commonplace no-tion that being "at home in Maryland" is a kind of being that is pervaded at almost all levels by an alienating and chillingly static ensemble of race relations.

Owing perhaps to the historical and representative functions imposed, Wilson's vignettes, the centerpieces of the installation, reproduced an image of static antagonism that itself reinforced the notion of intrinsically differential, or essentialist, cultural space. Instead it offered a radically nonintegrative picture of difference, one which in fact con-

solidated a state power in highlighting and honoring, if creatively reconfiguring, the symbolic means that sustain the extant social order as a form (really a *practice*) of containment. Even if visitors understood it as the result of an idiosyncratic action signaling the possibility of change, *Mining* limited the imagination of that change to what might be accomplished within an ultimately immutable structure. The transformation *Mining* represented was one from concealment to admission (a considerable step by any measure), not from alienation to the possibility of its overcoming. Moreover, its impermanence left no question that the MHS intended the action to be seen as representative—at the very least, of its having taken place, of the organization's investment in ameliorative justice. Probably it also seemed a means to satisfy and perhaps quell for a time a still-abstract black community's demands for representation. Once things were returned to order and the Society added recognition of these demands to its log of community services, there might have remained no urgency to interrogate the structural relations among the parties involved—those relations whose avoidance made the work so easy to do. Thus unchanged in substance from any prior historical moment, the MHS's relationship to the "black community" post–*Mining the Museum* might plausibly have been predicted from the start—not only by the cynical, but by the assumptions of any reasonable person who was vaguely familiar with the cultural politics of Baltimore and such institutions' conventional conceptions of self-interest and social responsibility.

It is not difficult to recognize in the rhetoric and mechanics of *Mining* some quintessentially American ideas about how to do critical representation in a pluralistic context. This attitude toward the grossly uneven cultural geography of the United States imagines "reckoning with identity" to mean simply designating it. Thus it domesticates differences by thinking in terms of units such as "communities of difference,"

but seldom in terms of the contingent singularities that muddy differences and, by extension, make communities alternately hard to come by, difficult to live with, and at times painful to inhabit. Here I refer to the "common notion of the community as a coherent and unified social formation—equally valorized by the neoconservatives and the liberal left—which often serves exclusionary and authoritarian purposes in the very name of the opposite."[37] Among other effects, this approach to community interest rationalizes a view of what "race" and "racism" mean that cannot reckon with the ways contradictions (of politics, gender, generation, but also among *sheer subjects*) register within and not just among the formations, as functions of time, local specificity, and desire—all of which affect, by dispersing, the kinds of interest that obtain with each brandishment of a given "community" in public rhetoric. Racism and race with it, this attitude suggests, are only ever what have been perpetrated here all along. It speaks of (and to) race and racism in the same tongue, that of the "black experience" which forms what Hall calls "the ground—the terrain of the 'lived'—where consciousness and conditions intersect,"[38] establishing a homology of ways of being black that guarantees the integrity of the "black perspective."

If with *Mining* Wilson was "making the museum mine" for a time, then what kinds of desire did the work satisfy? The question is relevant because the notion of shared outlook carries over that of shared desire. Another function of desire is to express concern when ostensibly critical interventionary art practices exhibit little will to think out from—to fantasize—the fixed relation we always already know the "black community" to occupy with respect to its local houses of culture. What would it mean not simply to excavate existing black presences but actually to exploit that presence to alter or to envision the altering of the very structural forms that make the domestication of culture possible? At its most general, this would be a deeply speculative project—per-

haps not quite an intervention without a museum *but nearly so,* inasmuch as within such a project the museum and its ethnographers would exceed themselves exactly so as to find new positions with respect to each other. As one way to begin such a radical speculation, the investigator might shun the very framework of the visit, the interested but transient passing-through which, structurally or as a form of experience, promotes the falsehood that the cultural institution is less a persistent problem than an occasional nuisance. It envisions a new form of cultural institution, one that responds to the instability in our (anybody's) styles of imagining what it means, in and beyond that type of representational framework, to inhabit the bodies, communities, and scripts singly authored by cultures. Because these are themselves institutional concepts without which there would be nothing to feel or discover in representative cultural institutions, such a practice would relativize the categories institutions assign, highlighting their unique contributions to the procedures which construct and position subjects of culture.[39]

Prioritizing cultural processes over representative objects, declining the invitation to produce images, whether of unrelievably horrid conditions or of singular triumphant personalities, that effectively stop culture; avoiding the calcification of a "black perspective" that channels racialized consciousness into a worldview we can accept so long as we're getting ours; formulating representations of social conditions that reflect racism's own transformation with shifts in the terrain of the lived—this, perhaps, is what it would look like to value the state of transitoriness, of always-passing-through, which throws open the structures of both traveler and site. What would it mean to reverse the question as posed by *Mining,* to use "culture" and "community" to ask *how* the museum means, what are *its* conditions of appearance and how might they be reformulated so as to make it truly strange to us? All this is a way of

asking what fantasies might have to be indulged and forsaken in order to visualize these institutions not only as they make (or do not make) themselves available to us, but as we imagine they could be.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will pursue these questions as they bear on the deployment of fantasy in another Baltimore-based, museum-sited work, Isaac Julien's 2003 film installation *Baltimore*. The definition of fantasy operative here conjoins the work of two practitioners of British cultural studies, Stuart Hall and Elizabeth Cowie. In Hall's text, the problem is the conduct of cultural studies toward the practice of imagining. Hall imagines a cultural studies that does not simply consider or survey imaginative practices, but partakes of them. Thus Hall insinuates abstraction squarely in the domain of cultural critique:

> To think about or analyze the complexity of the real, the act of the practice of thinking is required; and this necessitates the use of the power of abstraction and analysis, the formation of concepts with which to cut into the complexity of the real, in order precisely to reveal and bring to light relationships and structures which cannot be visible to the naive naked eye, and which can neither present nor authenticate themselves.[40]

The important point about this methodological challenge is that it identifies fantasization as crucial for analyses of culture aimed at producing specific changes in the appearance of what is right in front of our noses precisely by thinking what is not. Hall's references to the "complexity of the real," as that which such analyses "cut into," do not yield to a simple

practice of capturing the actuality of the problem at hand. Rather they try to give critical presence to the means that produce identities but can "neither present nor authenticate themselves" because their success requires them to remain camouflaged. Such an effort requires one to dismantle given orders and objects of knowledge, through an ingression of "unthinkables" such as one that introduces into the museum certain sets of relations that its standard provisions do not, or cannot, account for.

If Hall helps us to think fantasy's utility as a strategic abstraction for thinking the "complexity of the real," Cowie's construction pulls that strategy across the brink of fantasy proper, supplementing the patently analytical sense it retains in Hall's formulation with a creative one well suited to a consideration of *Baltimore*, which in fact does both kinds of work. Cowie begins from Laplanche and Pontalis's account, where fantasy is "'the reverie, that form of novelette, both stereotyped and infinitely variable, which the subject composes and relates to himself in a waking state.'" Continuing, she observes that,

> rather than a notion of revelation, making visible what we would not otherwise be able to see—as with a microscope allowing us to see bacteria etc. invisible to the "naked" eye—fantasy... has come to mean the making visible, present, of what isn't there, of what can never directly be seen.... [I]t is difficult to therefore avoid defining the word in terms of what it is not, the world of reality.... This psychical reality of which fantasy is the nucleus has an effect on and for the subject just as much as the material, physical world may have. In analyzing fantasy, it is not a criterion that there be any factual basis for the fantasy "in reality" or that there be a wish for it to "really happen," rather the criterion is the level of "reality" the fantasy has for and in the psychical system of the subject.[41]

The special value of Cowie's account for the present discussion is the power it grants fantasy to aid the subject in declining, through decidedly personal action, a given domain's rules of representability. Whatever Wilson's intentions with *Mining*, the structuring of the project around an assumed identification between Wilson and the underserved audience,[42] combined with its rigid model of intercultural interchange, foreclosed the possibility of seeing *Mining* as consequent upon a private meditation. Another kind of museum fantasy asks how the complexity of the real is to bear its coexistence with, and dependency upon, institutions arrayed against its very complexity. The fantasizing I am using Hall and Cowie to describe intends to stay close to the subject, but wishes to avoid the kind of thematization of black subjectivity that limited *Mining*. The practice of fantasy I am suggesting *Baltimore* exemplifies is keyed to the enlargement of the scope of thinkable relations in a given realm. It achieves this broadening in part through the insistently public dimension of its fantasization. Not to be confused with felicities or inventions for their own sake, this practice stake a claim on behalf of a subject in need of declining a certain reality *in favor of a less certain one*. A function of a subject's psychical reality, it translates this reality outward into "the act of the practice of thinking," and pleasures openly in the "realism of the illusionism."[43] So rather than facilitating the disclosure of inner truths to a defying world or attempts to make real what isn't, this practice of "abstraction and analysis" opens the subject's borders to examine their formation in cultural processes (in history, language, relations). Within this practice, it is axiomatic that every subject's "limit" entails both a boundary to be recognized and a threshold that is continually crossed.

When such a practice specularizes fantasy, as does *Baltimore*, our concern for what Cowie calls "the content of the contingent as such" must be conditioned by the terms of the material's presentation. And of

course it matters a great deal that *Baltimore* is a film, its very mode offering up fantasy in what is also an undeniably real experience for viewers. Indeed this film convention is itself among the objects of *Baltimore*'s critique, for film, like the museum, is a means by which dominant structures of desire are given "accessible" public form. Yet for these same reasons, *Baltimore* is unconflicted in its complicity with the genre and its dependence upon its charge for the viewing subject. Thus *Baltimore*'s characterological and diegetic movement in, out of, and through private museum and anonymous urban spaces only but suggests a larger interest in the coherence of the "cultural institution" *and* of the supposition of its inherent realism—given the number of contingencies that specific relations and contexts place upon each.

Baltimore is an eleven-and-one-half-minute film that Julien shot in sixteen-millimeter format for projection onto three monumental screens.[44] It stars Melvin Van Peebles, the renowned Hollywood film director and actor who created and played the title character in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), a seminal film in the genre known as blaxploitation. *Baltimore* follows Van Peebles's character through three Baltimore institutions—the Walters Art Museum, the George Peabody Library, and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum—where he is stalked by Afro-Cyborg, described by Julien as "a femme fatale who traverses stereotypes of black power, Blaxploitation, and black science fiction" (fig. 3.10).[45] *Baltimore* figures this traversal by transforming her appearance three times over its short duration. Before proceeding along their serpentine path through these sites, the characters emerge from the streets of Baltimore. Thus the film opens with a three-screen wide-angle shot of the city's vast, recently developed harborside fascia before telescoping, with a quick cut, to a pedestrian point of view on the thickly settled streets of one of Baltimore's black ghettoes. Van Peebles and his adversary appear, one each on the two outer screens, before converging

3.10 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Three-screen DVD installation with sound, dimensions variable. Still: cyborg eyes. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

at the Wax Museum, where they independently review its collection of effigies of celebrated black women and men. There are over one hundred wax figures in the museum's collection today, but Julien's camera scans the scene with a darkened lens, briefly spotlighting figures including those of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, positioned shoulder-to-shoulder and grinning, the display concealing the fact that they were nemeses at the time of X's assassination; Colin Powell; popular entertainment personalities; and two graphic, dramatic full-scale exhibitions, "Into the Hold: The Slave Ship Experience," a chilling, full-size replica of a slave ship stowed with human cargo, and "The Struggle against Lynching: Lessons for Today."

Baltimore utilizes the Victorian-era Peabody Library's stack room—a five-story space with ornamental cast-iron balconies, massive skylight, and black-and-white marble floor—as a transitional space between the Wax Museum, the Walters Art Museum, and the city itself, the characters passing through it several times during the film. Like the characters themselves, each of these spaces—the Walters, a museum built upon two industrialist brothers' private collections and bequeathed to the city of Baltimore in 1931 "for the benefit of the public"; the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, founded in 1980 to promote the study and preservation of African-American history by giving children "a yardstick by which to measure the struggles";[16] and the Peabody, an icon of the Victorian-era conceptualization of "higher learning"—functions as a symbol of stylized culture poised to reflect and impart universal values. The two characters are filmed alone in these institutions, at once communing and at odds with them—apart from the crush of a crowd reenacting en masse the reverent protocol of museumgoing. They occupy the Peabody stack room together only momentarily and even then without direct encounter. Thus each is seen to relate to the spaces in a subject-, not object-determinate way, and Julien's filmic perception of the spaces shows us this, portraying the institutions as differently as their reading is staged

distinctively by each shape-shifting "visitor." *Baltimore* thus constructs the *visit* as the context of a possible performance, an effective enactment of subjectivity upon a ritual that would otherwise structure it.

Julien films the streets of working-class Baltimore as similarly desolate (fig. 3.11), such that they echo both the cold vitality of the wax museum and the vision of utopia offered up in an anonymous Renaissance painting of *The Ideal City*, a cornerstone of the Walters's collection. Van Peebles is seen viewing the painting up close, the encounter evoking, though less dramatically, the site of the city that served as Sweetback's battleground. *Baltimore*'s shifting of time and place reaches a climax in the final sequences, which see a number of the wax figurines from the Great Blacks in Wax Museum congregate in one of the Walters' luxurious painting galleries. Van Peebles encounters his own wax doppelganger before Julien closes the film by flanking this effigy with those of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. (figs. 3.12, 3.13).

Baltimore crosses sociality and culture, users and spaces, in a fantasy vision of a borderless museum articulated in a direct but unresolved dialogue with Baltimore proper. A comparison with *Mining the Museum* is apposite because *Baltimore* models a "mining" of a very different sort—chiefly, its implicit account of subjectivity is open, not closed, and accomplished through negotiation, not assertion—in seeking not to establish an equivalency between institutional representations and actual conditions, but rather a multiplication of relationships that might be imagined to exist both between and among viewers and institutions, pasts and presents, and modes and politics of representation. And doubtless on more levels than this *Baltimore* clearly stages a very different kind of intervention into the museum and wider cultures of Baltimore than *Mining*. Yet several advantages remain in considering this art, its aims, and its realization in comparison. Although both projects were commissioned by The Contemporary Museum,[47] in discussing his work Julien pointedly expressed his view of the relationship between the host

3.11 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Still: characters in street in linear perspective. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures.

3.12 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Still: Melvin Van Peebles with his wax double. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures. ALSO PLATE 7.

institutions, their facilitation of his project, and the resulting work: "We should forget about that sort of framework . . . through my own interest I approached the Great Blacks in Wax Museum. It wasn't the Walters, it wasn't the Contemporary, it was me. The idea of putting wax models in the Walters [was] my idea."[48] Julien's resistance to programmatic implementations can, I think, be understood as a way of gaining some conceptual distance from Wilson's project. More importantly, though, it underscores the creative and precisely counterinstitutional nature of the intercultural collaboration about which *Baltimore* fantasizes. The film's derationalization of the city, its "characteristic" cultural spaces, even of the figure of the artistic subject (in tripling the figure of Van Peebles) works precisely to criticize the territorializing terms of such arrangements. Julien's virtually empty city of the future-past demonstrates in another way how, as Kwon observes, the "siting of art in 'real' places can also be a means to extract the social and historical dimensions of these places in order to variously serve the thematic drive of the artist [and] satisfy institutional demographic profiles."[49] The proliferation of types and relations among real places in *Baltimore* replaces a vital chunk of Baltimore experience with something different, and less.

Both artists approached Baltimore as a specific setting that plays host to a particularly old and extreme version of the American racial drama. Also, both works evoke and construct fantastic scenarios as devices with which to rearticulate existing representations of culture. Wilson deployed fantasy, or urged its use, in his critical reinstallation, off of which viewers could read his own readings of actually and subliminally manifested race relations in the Maryland Historical Society collection. But as I will argue below, Julien's film uses fantasy to envision relations embedded in the fabric *connecting* the institutions but designated as impossible within them—including cinema and cultural politics, as well as the museum and state culture.

3.13 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Van Peebles with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. *Baltimore Series: Déjà vu*, 2003. Three color photographs, 39¼ × 44 in. (left and right images), 39¼ × 49¼ in. (center image). Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures. ALSO PLATE 8.

Julien uses mise-en-scène, sound, and side-by-side screen placement to push the sometimes clashingly different ambiences of the four sites (three museums and the city itself) nearly to the point of synthesis but never to resolution. *Baltimore*'s viewer surrenders her sense of place early on. In the first minute, Julien displays the nondescript panoramic city view, downscales to a black neighborhood in montage, and follows the female protagonist into the wax museum. Inside, the interplay of gazes, unresolved points of view, and visual elisions suggest competing sovereignties, their transaction equally affecting the integrity of the institutional and human bodies that are perhaps the film's true "subjects." *Baltimore* first achieves this effect in the (visual) establishment of its setting as fragmented, dispersed, and intercultural. This issue arises in a second way with the appearance and disposition of its protagonists, both of whom embody multiple subject types.

Julien's image of Baltimore functions paradoxically but crucially in the film. *Baltimore* opens on a series of shots that present the city as it is territorialized by tropes. Seen in gloomy, overcast weather, it appears as a typical contemporary American scene of perpetual development, an urban center, a ghetto, an "ideal city" on the order of Renaissance representation, and as a nondescript matrix of streets, structures, and walls. These spare shots of the city successfully evoke a certain traffic in relations that we know to exist in cities without having to see it. This is the city that urban theorist Massimo Cacciari has called "the general form assumed by the process of the rationalization of social relations."[36] This city-as-"general form" serves as the literal support for the cultural institutions traversed by the film's action, whose fantastic quality is signaled by its almost colorized brightness in comparison to the bleakly toned cityscapes. *Baltimore* positions these sites, then, as highly visible efforts to capture and describe these processes in events of fabricated, summary representation. In this way *Baltimore* uses the weirdly rich deadness of

the urban scene as a way to establish a context at an inherent disjuncture from the pale idea of place promoted within the (any) museum's practice. By the force of irony, the institutions' static character is contravened by their dramatic overinvestment with color aura, which now appears the embalmed remainder of a metropolitan ambience stripped from the city. This effect animates *Baltimore*'s images of the all-too-real city in reverse, making the opulent and (symbolically) thickly peopled museum spaces seem all the more airless and uninhabitable.

By accenting the hyperreal alienation that links the three institutions, this radical contextualization derationalizes the known relations of difference, distance, and estrangement between them. The film acknowledges but does not dwell on the obvious contrasts between its institutional sites, signifying them only by reference to the plain, painted-cinderblock facade of the Wax Museum, past which the characters move at the film's beginning and end, and by the showy opulence that the Peabody's and Walters' spaces have in common. Rather, *Baltimore* finds its meaning in "the *violation* of [the] signifying limit of *space*," which allows it to apply differential visions of the past, both specific to Baltimore and generalized, to a create a matrix of contemporary intercultural relationships across space and time, reality and fantasy.[31] Julien's contextualization of the film *in* the city and *Baltimore*'s formal erasure of the boundaries between institutions rigorously rework "site" into a ground that makes thinkable connections between the constituencies the museums ostensibly "serve," rather than one that anchors communities in their specificity. *Baltimore* finds a viable craft for this strange mode of travel by dislodging the filmic convention of location, which Julien thematizes by *locating location*. That is, the museums are not only in and for Baltimore but come to be what they are according to the "complexity of the real" that obtains in that city. Each opens a space that might ask to be viewed as culturally specific, but cannot at

any rate refuse its dependency on the chain of proofs provided by other museums and libraries past and present. It can only circulate its particular account by simultaneously circulating those of others "unlike" it.

The representational possibilities opened up with the establishment of this moving ground are mirrored in *Baltimore*'s construction of subjectivity. Although the film's capacious spaces contain conspicuously few living subjects, the dramatis personae are themselves subjects configured in multiplicity. What's more, this multiplicity is *effective*: for the most part, *Baltimore* sees Van Peebles and Afro-Cyborg for how they define and alter our view of the spaces, rather than the other way around. In the scenes constructed to mimic the linear perspective of *The Ideal City*, the characters' movements are emphatically away from the center that would vanish them (see fig. 3.11). They are at the same time impossible to quite get into focus as characters, since each is a hybrid whose various tropes never align neatly. The opening voiceover is a nostalgic aural collage of dialogue from blaxploitation films, but when the actors themselves appear, *Baltimore* commences its unraveling of the notion of the screen icon-cum-paradigmatic black subject. Van Peebles is introduced under the sign of blaxploitation but bears the worn look of a reluctant cultural icon. He moves with none of Sweetback's purposiveness (Van Peebles's protagonist was ever "on the run") and appears particularly nonplused by the melodramatic appeals of the Great Blacks in Wax Museum. Importantly, neither Van Peebles nor the film can muster the untiring attention and vigilance that this sort of display would exact from the visitor; instead *Baltimore* finds a rather tedious and forced progression—and makes its tedium felt. We are invited to regard these disidentifications as prefiguring Van Peebles's failure to find "himself" in *any* of the film's venues. Both Van Peebles and Afro-Cyborg signify opaquely from start to finish, with Van Peebles symbolizing, at once, the antihero Sweetback and the revered director, myth and mythmaker. Likewise, Afro-Cyborg is

an amalgam of recognizable blaxploitation characters from the past and a specter of futurity: sorting her out as so many parts Coffy, Black Belt Jones, or Dawn is a futile affair, for she is all and none of these figures. The characters resist typology to the same degree that the spaces themselves do and in virtually the same way: first as spectacles and then as the blurry-edged sites of their undoing. That is, the characters are differently defined by different viewers, their movements through the film's spaces impacting upon both their own definition and those of the spaces themselves. In this way, *Baltimore* figures the struggle with visibility as a crisis of coherence, a conflict endured by and at the level of the subject but radiating subject-effects outward that alters the contexts through which subjects move, including those designed to convey their very meaning. *Baltimore* deems this struggle a productive condition that undermines the very ground of institutionally fixed relation, leaving unresolved the tension among its locations to assure the open-endedness of its subjects. A persistent troubling of identity categories, one that begins with the subject but also exceeds it, lies at the foundation of *Baltimore*'s institutional critique.

As the film progresses, one realizes that much of the "action" is thwarted or unseen, consisting of our construction of fantastical arrangements of site and subjectivity. This activity is unavoidable, for not only is this how film is made to be assimilated by spectators, but the self-compounding implications of the diegesis are so great as to produce the need for a reading that contains them. But while *Baltimore* is certainly a viewer-identified rather than meaning-identified film work, this characteristic is, arguably, essential to the film's dissipation of the narratives its characters and locations want so desperately to tell. The film thrives on this proliferation, may even be said to espouse it as a practice: further elaboration as a strategy for preventing showing and telling from congealing into show-and-tell. A committed mobility among spaces and

types that foils the stoppage of cultural time and space in museum-friendly forms: this, *Baltimore* insists, is the fantasy we surrender in viewing such institutions only in their discreteness. Because identity is such a form, what may seem a contrast between the Walters Art Museum and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum is actually a commonality. Both "preserve culture" through a kind of provenance that authenticates identity and isolates histories, establishing chains of ownership between their holdings and those who, following the accepted protocols of use, would recognize them as their own. But *Baltimore*, in founding its characters in multiplicity and disidentification, finds these institutions' images of culture as they are caught up in an almost arbitrary system of exchanges where the really determinant forces are users and their means of usage. The sites are neither depicted nor capable of being read as somehow essentializing in themselves. Rather, they provide the protagonists with a context for identification, transfixing delight, existential crisis, and plain bewilderment. With the migration of the Wax Museum statues to the Walters, *Baltimore* makes concrete what the film accomplishes from the start: a displacement of objects from their "proper places," a move that makes imaginable an opening of museum frameworks themselves. This view, not only available in fantasy but consequent upon "the act of the practice of thinking," erases both the traditional division between the museum's physical setting and its defining, human context and its suspension of time in neat series of representational moments.

But what is the fruit of all this work I am imputing to *Baltimore's* reconceptualization of the "cultural framework"? I want to suggest that it is a view of the kinds of existence that such frameworks disallow, which only become possible through the vigilant practice of exit and return. By deploying symbols of blaxploitation, which worked hard to be an independent cultural form, Julien underlines the powers and exclu-

sions operating in more general practices of heroization and memorialization—matters of *existence* to the degree that they are foremost matters of subjectivity and history. Importantly, once we see Van Peebles enter the Wax Museum during the film, the only other time he appears there he is leaving, walking away without noticeable reaction to the "Slave Ship Experience," which has been described as a "galley of scenes depicting rape, torture, forced feeding, and other such atrocities as throwing the sick or enfeebled slaves overboard into the mouths of attentive sharks, all the while a chorus of reverbed voices whispering 'Remember, remember!'"[51] Julien's decision to distance Van Peebles from the Great Blacks in Wax Museum in this way—he declines it, only to be enjoined by it later, as an effigy—is perhaps *Baltimore*'s most direct statement about the processes that establish cultural icons and iconographies as versions of social truth.

A filmic genre that responded directly to a structural tension over questions of representation within black culture *about* black culture, blaxploitation offered an alternative to the closure of the black political imagination threatened by a two-party choice between nationalism and Civil Rights. It accomplished its political critique in part by pushing the boundaries of black sexuality, compromising hegemonical priorities with felicitous recourse to interracial sex and the inversion (or at least playful manipulation) of gender roles. The mainstream cinema, blaxploitation pointed out, did politics too, by failing to offer alternatives to stagnating political options. By thematizing the cinema within its museum fantasy, *Baltimore* reminds us that the cinema is an institution of art like any other. Like the museum, the cinema leverages spectators' relationships to cultural formations of desire, including fantasy. Though the two mediums are configured, occupied, and taken up differently, both are symptomatic of that style of cultivated knowledge about the world which is peculiar to modernity. For Foucault, the library and the

museum were exemplary cases, both managing the subject's relationship to fantasy by channeling it into a mode of study. Even the decorum we observe in these spaces, Foucault suggests, constitutes an acknowledgment of their supremacy within a hierarchy of reveries: "Fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library. . . . The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge." Upon their institutionalization, the domain of fantasy was "no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. Henceforth, the visionary experience [arose] from the black and white surface of printed signs."[33]

Like these, cinema is an institution that designates certain practices of creation, narration, and existence as venerable and worthy of emulation while proscribing others through hierarchization and exclusion. Indeed it accomplishes this with a relative lack of encumbrance by narrative immediacy. *Baltimore*, in its critical appropriation of blaxploitation, affiliates itself with a cinematic practice that was pitched against mainstream cinema's seemingly complete annexation by what was, for many, an unacceptably abstract style of imagining the new phase of politics that had seemed to open up around 1970. Thus blaxploitation was significant for Julien not only in its medium specificity but in its propinquity to his own method. *Baltimore* bears several marks of the optimistic, critical history of the present that Julien has elaborated over several of the films he has created since the mid 1980s. This enterprise developed as part of a larger elaboration of queer cultural practice in which Julien is a frontline participant. As Michael Warner has put it, because "[q]ueers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer," questions of subjectivity and desire are located squarely in the center of the critical consideration of *how one finds one's*

way to sexual, racial, political, and other social identifications, as a subject whose very possibility is denied in normative frameworks. For the far from simple reason that "the logic of the sexual order [in which homosexuality is pathologized or altogether vanished] is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts."[54]

Here, Julien suggests how his queer investment informed *Looking for Langston*, his landmark film of 1989 that brought him to an international audience:

> I wanted to talk about the role of the black artist in relationship to the black community and specifically the role of the black gay artist.... So if you happened to be gay during the Harlem Renaissance, what kinds of spaces would you have existed in? I wasn't particularly interested in celebrating his own specific lifestyle. I was trying to comment on how I imagined this lifestyle would have existed.[55]

Julien avows the "role" of the black artist as something to be problematized from the standpoint of desire, specifically the gay male desire widely suppressed in black life. But importantly, Julien does this not to locate equivalencies or models, but rather to ground present-day fantasies by locating, or claiming, points of identification in the past. Hence the centrality of fantasy: to ask, "If you happened to be gay during the Harlem Renaissance, what kinds of spaces would you have existed in?" is, paraphrasing Hall, to bring to light relationships and structures that cannot be visible—and very possibly did not have the luxury of inhabiting spaces as such. Like Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, Julien's *Looking*

for Langston also satisfied a desire to achieve visibility in history. But Julien gave the audience a purchase on the film's subject and relationships by making "desire exist in the construction of images and [creating] a narrative that would enable audiences to think, rather than be told." As Julien says, "I was trying to comment on how I imagined." Again, Cowie's account of fantasy is useful here: "In analyzing fantasy, it is not a criterion that there be any factual basis for the fantasy 'in reality' or that there be a wish for it to 'really happen,' rather the criterion is the level of 'reality' the fantasy has for and in the psychical system for the subject."[36] Foregrounding fantasy, and thus refusing the culturally clarifying role traditionally assigned to black artists, made it possible for Julien to imagine and then to recreate Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance on his own terms, as well as, more importantly, to emphasize the contradictory experiences in which nonconformist desires, such as homosexual and interracial desire, do not just implicate but impact the structuring of blackness and black representational spaces.

Accordingly, the materials of fantasization in *Baltimore* are the institutions, the city itself, and the notional black community. The film recognizes in each a limiting idealization of black social life which risks compartmentalizing time, dictating identifications, directing political imagination, and stopping cultural flows whether institutionalized in a fact, an answer to, or an example of "conditions." *Baltimore* itself proposes rethinking these formations in terms of relationships and structures that are invisible yet implicit among them. If viewing the film amounts to a crisis of situation (re: place, history, fact), this is because *Baltimore* understands this movement as effective, as productive of a new kind of situation—one that is above all representable. Within the film, the spaces are indistinct: the characters enter only one institution (the Wax Museum), but in doing so, they gain seemingly unfettered ac-

cess to all three; although Afro-Cyborg dials into her palm to make Van Peebles materialize in the Peabody stack room, the two never meet face to face, and she never enters the Walters painting gallery. As if to escape the resolutions held out by plot or the designation of aesthetic personality, Afro-Cyborg and Van Peebles dissolve the spaces they occupy, such that *Baltimore*'s setting-subject relationship is one of interdependence instead of determination. Vitally, the characters don't accomplish this by special exertion: there is no drama of escape, and the chase is unconsummated (so much so that one feels as though Julien lost interest in it). What matters is keeping moving. What viewers might consider the protagonists' failure to materialize fully against backgrounds, real and imagined, that would clarify them by location in a "proper" place, the characters seem to experience as a banal fact of life.

Baltimore's refusal to submit its characterization, action, or setting to the determining logics of location seems to reveal something about the principle of those locations' selection, or at least the import of these characters and the creative tropes they represent. An observation by Joanna Russ about the aesthetics of science fiction well describes the relation of subject and site in *Baltimore*: "The relation of foreground and background that we are used to after a century and a half of realism will not obtain. Indeed they may be reversed.... Stories ostensibly about persons will really be about topology. Erotics will be intercranial, mechanical (literally), and moving."[57] Afro-futurism, which is underwritten in part by the logic of continuous transformation, is an aesthetics of interdependence as a form of survival. But just as surely as Afro-Cyborg evokes an Octavia Butler character, when she hides a pistol in her afro she calls to mind Coffy, the blaxploitation heroine played by Pam Grier, who stowed razor blades in hers. The uncertainty characteristic of a life lived exceeding one's categories seems to inform the characters' idea

of a "proper place." That it is guaranteed by these insurgent black cultural politics seems to indicate their importance for *Baltimore*'s explosion of the cultural framework epitomized by the museum, and in this instance especially by its aversion to the popular.

It bears noting that both blaxploitation and Afro-futurism date to the 1970s, falling therefore outside the bounds of the Great Blacks in Wax Museum's political narrative. As Mark Alice Durant writes, even though the museum was founded in 1980, the "culturally enshrined heroism of the Civil Rights Movement provides the culminating iconograpy."[58] This periodization appears symptomatic of the same positivism that sets Elijah Muhammad and Malcom X, or, as we see in *Baltimore*, Kweisi Mfume and Louis Farrakhan, side by side in its wax dioramas. For blaxploitation, it also produces a historical quandary correspondent to the political and cultural position it occupied when first coming to public notice, in 1971, with the controversy over Van Peebles's film. But within the history of black cultural practice, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* represents a powerfully articulated ambivalence—as Van Peebles himself put it, "the colored intelligentsia were not too happy about it; neither were the nationalists"[59]—as an art form that was literally caught between politics and pleasure in attempting to respond to the constrictions of both black and nonblack demarcations of black representational space. Though, as Ed Guerrero reminds us, *Sweet Sweetback* was "made at the height of the male-dominated Black Power rebellion and... marks a turning point for the black male image on the big screen,"[60] this turning point did not entail a decisive reconsolidation of black roles and identities. Instead, it refused stale, box-office-friendly portrayals of "noble Negroes" identified with Hollywood as well as normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender identities upheld in dominant models of black politics.[61] The film's aesthetic is one of unbroken movement between contradictory domains: across antagonisms

between black men and women largely disavowed in public life to that point; across racial lines, both in experimentations with the political gains of preceding decades and in open acknowledgment of interracial desire (in one of *Sweet Sweetback's* most notorious scenes, the title character and a white woman have sex before a mixed-race crowd of onlookers); and across—indeed, in opposition to—conventional models of black masculinity promoted in previous filmmaking and in the standardized roster of racial "role models." As increasingly distant yet ever more needful reminders of a politics of representation centered on pleasures forbidden by the cultural authorities and committed to envisioning a thriving social and political future by no means guaranteed in reality, blaxploitation and Afro-futurism provide *Baltimore* with a crucial energy for restoring existence's constitutive antagonisms to "black representation."

Just as importantly, within *Baltimore*, blaxploitation, like Afro-futurism but to a greater degree owing to Van Peebles's iconicity, denotes the tactic of resymbolization itself as a way to make new culture. Specifically, as simultaneously a medium-specific device with which to complicate the "identity" of Julien's film and a complex sign of the unfinished business of imagining culture differently, blaxploitation is a tool for prying apart a viewpoint on contemporary social arrangements that neatly aligns subjectivity, artistic personality, culture, and community—and is typified by the museum. (At this moment it may be helpful to note the fear of fantasy at work in Du Bois's 1926 proscription, which declared that Negro art would not abide "the mere stylist or dilettante.") Other examples of Julien's film practice allow insight into the institution's significance for him. So, too, do the prose and poetry of Essex Hemphill, who collaborated with Julien on several projects before his death in 1995.[82] Julien's *Vagabondia* (1999) centers on a vagabond dancer who, with the ghosts of two Creole women, stages an occupation of

Sir John Soane's Museum, which occupies the architect's London house. *The Attendant* (1993), developed in response to an Orientalist painting of slaves on the western coast of Africa by François-Auguste Biard, refashions the dominations enacted in the background of the painting into an affirmation of gay interracial desire in the historical foreground, now depicted in fantasy sequences of sado-masochism enacted and directed by an after-hours museum guard. In both of these films, as in *Baltimore*, museums become the site of processes that seem incongruous with the priorities and world pictures established by their holdings, yet are exactly what mark them as sites where meaningful cultural actions continually occur. They represent the museum as always at work: on the work, on the artist, on the viewer, even on incidental passers-through. Julien's museum, then, renders transparent the force with which wider, museumizing trends enforce silence in regard to actual sexual and other social practices: "The point is that the *exclusion* necessary to the formation of social identity . . . is simultaneously a *production* at the level of the Imaginary, and a production . . . of a complex hybrid fantasy emerging out of the very attempt to demarcate boundaries, to unite and purify the social collectivity."[63] Since domination is achieved partly through this type of production, its refusal can be carried out in counterfantasies that open boundaries, upsetting identity's regulatory function. *Baltimore* generates just such a disturbance, a fantasy within a fantasy using living elements—Afro-Cyborg and Van Peebles—signifying past and present to lever open the museum's time. This process unfreezes the subject deadened, and the processes annulled, under the museum's gaze; in Lacan's words:

> This terminal time of the gaze, which completes the gesture [distinguished from the act], I place strictly in relation to what I later say about the evil eye. The gaze in itself not only terminates the

> movement, it freezes it. . . . [T]he evil eye is the *fascinum*, it is that which has the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life. At the moment the subject stops, suspending his gesture, he is mortified. The anti-life, anti-movement function of this terminal point is the *fascinum*, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly.[84]

The museumizing gesture is a threat exactly because it reproduces cultural subjects as frozen—a function made apparent by the disconcerting effigies that fill the wax museum, but dramatically more reversed when they reconvene at the Walters. Its stilling eye harnesses the "fascinating" power of the picture, object, or culturally specific institution to fix culture by fixing the world of subjects to whom it reveals itself in turn, and whom it can thereby be said to "represent." This process also invests the subject of culture with the power to contemplate others while renouncing involvement with them. In a 1972 denouncement of blaxploitation, Roy Innis, the national director of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), conveyed this sentiment in a defense of racial realism: "Once you get through that vicarious thrill of seeing a black man beat up a white man on the screen [in a blaxploitation film], you go back and face the same evil system you faced before you went there. And we should *always* deal with reality and not fantasy."[85] But such concerted efforts to clarify the categories of culture—racial, artistic, representational—are precisely what made disorienting projections such as those of Afro-futurism and blaxploitation necessary. In blaxploitation, as in Julien's film, the recourse to fantasy is valued precisely for its power to dismantle the seemingly limitless power of the museumist model of cultural representation epitomized in Innis's remarks, to perpetuate an ethical standard of representation that sees subjects and cultures not as they are constituted through actual social practices, but rather as they

are arrested *by* the "evil eye" or "system" whose very mode is that of contemplative stillness and silence.

Structurally, *Baltimore* turns away from this model by distributing the single film image across a horizon of dislocation, dispersed in three units across the viewer's field of vision. The stand-alone film image is already keyed to movement rather than arrest. But when divided into three unsynched channels, the film construct counteracts the production of a straight mirror image. This continual re-fusing of the image and postponement of narrative satisfaction exactly opposes the kind of vision peculiar to the museum. Indeed, *Baltimore* makes some of its most ambitious visual claims in the service of stretching the contracted sense of time that plagues the museum's viewpoint on culture. Just as its triptych construction stresses the processual quality of the film image, literally its persistence through time, it also lends *Baltimore* at times the quality of an altarpiece. This is especially so when Julien steeps Van Peebles in the Walters Museum's grandiloquent, oil-painting-lined architecture. The effect is most pronounced at the end of the film, when, after a sequence of face-offs between Van Peebles and his wax double (in which the pair are backed by a devotional painting), Julien fixes the camera on Van Peebles's wax effigy and slowly begins to retreat until the wax Van Peebles is seen to stand between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.—here representing the opposed forces that united in their attack on blaxploitation's "distortion of the race life-style."[66] This fantasy construction of black cultural history (Julien had Van Peebles's likeness created for the film) not only memorializes Van Peebles but grants him a mediating role between two resolute, and irreconcilable, figures of cultural politics. Yet in the same move with which Julien appears to apotheosize the director, he underlines the threat this museumizing closure poses. The final scene in the Walters has the real Van Peebles (with cigar) address the wax triumvirate from the two outer screens, shortly before

exiting the wax museum (not the Walters) and returning Julien's camera to the street. When Van Peebles meets his wax doppelganger, Julien evokes but does not use a common narrative device, known from *La beauté du diable*, in which Faust's mirror image begins to live a life of its own, and from films in which a protagonist's reflection exits the mirror to do deeds in the subject's name.[67] *Baltimore* short-circuits this device's duplicity, using it instead to affirm Van Peebles's entitlement to be simultaneously an icon of good or ill *and* incongruous with his own image.

Van Peebles has said of blaxploitation that it changed Hollywood film by adding the formula "of the black winning and being triumphant."[68] Doubtless its status at *Baltimore*'s close is far less decisive, however. There it occupies the middle ground in a tripartite image of black political styles, wherein each unit represents a program of limited success. If *Baltimore* as a whole privileges Van Peebles, this is partly to do with artistic debt, but more so with his ability to signify the courage to commit representation to a radically expanded definition of "community," as founded in uneven sexual relations, practical indulgences in proscribed entertainments, and an ultimately unpredictable relationship to racial others. Thus when, toward the end of *Baltimore*, several statues from Great Blacks in Wax gather in the baroque paintings gallery of the Walters, rather than sharpening the differences between these two classes of objects, Julien films them in soft focus and in an arrangement that causes them to appear "woven into a single tableau with the paintings."[69] This scene appends an ellipsis, not a period, on *Baltimore*'s fantastical exercise in culture reformation—an exercise that posits cultural identity not as defined by an engagement with cultural objects but as emerging from it, that understands belonging as an active process rather than a given state.[70] Rather than puzzling over belonging as a problem in need of clarifying, *Baltimore* represents it as the organizing problem of living. Kobena Mercer has named this quandary "the challenge of

sameness: the fact that we share the same planet as our enemies and our adversaries."[71] To make a black man visiting a fancy white art museum into a spectacle as *Baltimore* does, though not in the way *Mining the Museum* had, is not simply to ask what makes that a spectacle, but to attempt against the odds to compose an *unfascinating* image of the practice of solidarity. Blaxploitation, now, can be seen as doing the same. For instance, when *Sweet Sweetback's* politicized fantasy in direct opposition to a very old silence on some blacks' actual social practices—indulgences in sex, drugs, style, even stereotypes—it disarticulated race-identified cultural spaces within and beyond cinema, posing the question of culture itself as a function of containment.

This suspicious view of frameworks of culture where the creation of lives is a central occupation has long been an informing idea for the practice of British cultural studies, and, with a few notable exceptions, a missing one in American-style considerations of minority representational activities. Many cultural studies practitioners have since the 1960s worked from a cognizance of a British "version" of the very problematic explored in *Mining the Museum*—namely, that black Britons are a "reminder and remainder of [Britain's] historical past, and of the paradoxical disadvantage of an early start as one of the key factors of present-day, post-Empire, decline: *we are here because you were there.*"[72] Emerging from the crisis of representational authority incited by these "reminders" were coalitions that bound diversely affiliated black Britons to other cultural and political minorities in cultures of hybridity which, as Mercer reminds us, "must be seen as crucial efforts to answer the 'possibility and necessity of creating a new culture': *so that you can live.*"[73] Within these provisional formations, representation is conceived as a matter of establishing conditions for survival within, not against, an idiom dominated (*but not belonging*) to one's adversaries. Sometimes, survival conditions require one to turn a critical eye on "one's own" without being

seen to abandon a shared interest. In this respect, Julien and Mercer, as practitioners of cultural studies and sometime collaborators, have played vital roles. Their work and that which it has inspired begins by problematizing a racial realism that presumes the authority, authenticity, and transparency of straight black masculinities. Still more importantly it has used the open grid of "black sexuality" to multiply the kinds of relationship available in "reality" by dialoguing openly with the limitless possibilities opened up in fantasy, which lie between the social and the psychic.

In enacting a related move, *Baltimore* complicates our thinking not just about *Mining the Museum* but about a matrix of relations between cultural conditions and consciousness. Its avowals are manipulated and uneasy, but its resolve to outrun fixed relations and politics of representation is quite certain. The cadre of personages gathered in its closing tableau—Peter Paul Rubens, W. E. B. Du Bois, Billie Holliday, El Greco, and Melvin Van Peebles are there—is important exactly because it is so unlikely. Yet how swiftly it puts into one's mind the kind of price we pay for mercilessly clean pictures of culture.

4
Painting Problems

Glenn Ligon's view of painting has always been a little awry. He considers his experiences with Willem de Kooning's *Pirate* (fig. 4.1), for instance, among the most important in his formation: "When I was in college, I made pilgrimages to the Museum of Modern Art to see it." And yet:

> A peculiar thing happened when I looked at that painting. I would stand in front of it for minutes and it would seem to get brighter and come into sharp focus. . . . I took it to mean that I had a special bond with his paintings, and that I "got" them in a very mystical way. A couple of years later I was in a car with my brother and I couldn't read the signs. . . . My brother said, "You need glasses" . . . and sure enough, I did need glasses. The next time I went to see *Pirate*, that thing that usually happened didn't happen. I realized that what I had taken for a mysterious transmission . . . was actually my eyes taking a few minutes to focus on what was in front of me. Curiously, this didn't diminish the painting at all. I think what I was always

4.1 Willem de Kooning, *Pirate (Untitled II)*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 88 × 76¾ in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund. © 2006 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

> really responding to, what always moved me, was the traces of the body that I read in the swoops and strokes of the work.[1]

The significance of Ligon's exchange with *Pirate* lies partly in an understanding of the difference between the conceptual resources available to de Kooning and Ligon at their respective historical moments, and partly in an understanding of what Ligon has created out of that difference.[2] The lessons of the remarkable nontransformation in Ligon's relationship with *Pirate*, given that it has existed for him as two very different phenomena, are deposited in the text paintings he has produced since 1988—issued episodically and usually in series, between his photo-text, sculpture, installation, and video works.[3]

In the overwhelming majority of these paintings, Ligon appropriates text and stencils it, often many times over, typically with oilstick or some other extremely viscous medium, over a hand-applied, painted background, usually monochromatic and sometimes silk-screened. These paintings are structured by the same conflicts that animate the above anecdote: between ways of painting and ways of being, representer and representation, figure and ground, art and object. In all senses, then, these works about the body are as deeply involved with critiques of the ineradicably social terms of vision itself as they are with techniques held over from the aesthetic regimes these critiques overturned. Yet Ligon's text paintings, despite appearances, fiercely resist the textualist "solutions" offered by many such critiques. There always remains to be negotiated within them a pleasure in looking that has nothing to do with reading. Just as the choice to paint required constant work against its enclosures, so would the choice to engage text, which artists such as Barbara Kruger and Martha Rosler had successfully deployed as what Rosalyn Deutsche describes as a "vehicle for interrupting the rhetoric of the image—the strategies whereby the image imposes its message on

viewers."[1] In a practice that held fast to the promises of both, however, Ligon found a way of going ahead. The works I will discuss derive their vitality from being situated squarely inside a conflict between looking and reading. Just as in the anecdote above, where "body" connotes at once de Kooning's subject and the literal tracks the painter left in the work, Ligon's text paintings contain the two sides of that investment in a practice that is, for that very reason, exemplary of the difficulty for some contemporary practitioners of a clear choice between modernism and postmodernism.

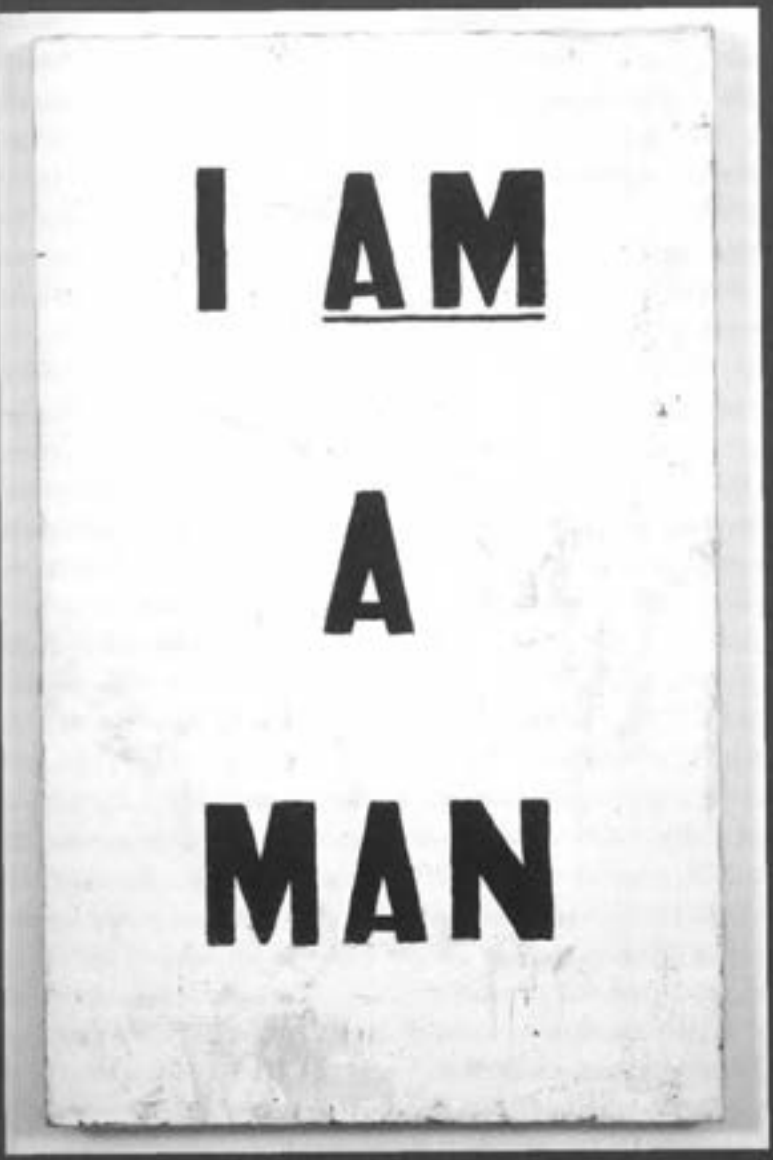
Ligon's encounter with the conflict occurred in the mid 1980s, when he graduated from school and embarked on a career. He was torn at that time between a material and libidinal investment in painting (Ligon was an ardent abstract expressionist until the very moment he first included language in his work) and the misgivings generated in his recognition of the daunting ontological and political valences the medium had acquired by that time. For young artists cognizant of the critical culture waiting to receive their work, pure painting represented an especially loaded option, having been aligned with some of the most restrictive hegemonies in art and art institutions, such as the museum and gallery system, history of art, and the related social practices in which alternative mediums and critical positions are validated and proscribed. Because Ligon's output since 1988 is underlain by a painting practice that is at once invested in and critical of the "innocence" that painting had lost at that time (again), his work is indispensable for understanding how the dawning of postmodernist art practice has come to be viewed, as its urgencies and those of its contestant discourse come, increasingly, to occupy the same space. Such practices also allow particular insight into the ways aesthetic practices associated with "identity politics" have come retroactively to mediate our view of art's postmodernization (and perhaps our own), in part by making visible the perils that textualiza-

tion has in common with picturing.[5] By "picturing" I am referring to the practice Mary Kelly attributed to the critical and pictorial project of postwar modernism in an important 1981 essay. Kelly's designation of the vehicle in question as an "artistic text" is a rather decisive textualization itself. Nevertheless her characterization of this modernism's investment in the pictorial is invaluable. Of the "artistic text," she writes: "It must demonstrate pictoriality without radical purification, retain the evidence of a passage without posing the problem of interpretation, filter a temperament without reference to social constraints."[6] A goal of this chapter is to consider what it means that Ligon continues to hold fast to his identity as a painter not only at the midpoint of a career full of dramatic and successful abandonments of the medium, and at a time when the label is so burdened with symbolism that many viewers see a provocation before they see a painting, but given the amount of distance his project requires him to maintain from the artistic text Kelly describes above. The central question here is not, What can painting be and do? but, What can painting be and do for this artist?

Ligon has described the experience from which he works as one of permanent dislocation, brought on by the simultaneous occupation of multiple, overlapping circles of speech—a "location" from which he speaks at once as a black gay male painter working after modernism.[7] In the 1980s, this unsettlement and specificity seemed incongruous with his desire to paint in an abstract expressionist mode. I say "incongruous" because it has been since that time that abstraction has come to be identified not as universal but culturally specific, inflected by its difference after long being rendered "cultureless."[8] The practice itself is typecast with a stock role, largely filled by white heterosexual men who enjoyed a kind of cultural neutrality as a matter of social entitlement: in the "field" of abstraction constituted by painters and critics, to be a specific person with specific desires is seldom construed as a matter of

accomplishment but rather is seen as a given. Could a black artist describe a black painting in the following way without being taken for a fool? "[A] pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art."[9] Probably not. For it is not only that abstraction has posed a problem for the black artist; it has up to now been impossible for black practitioners. The ease with which we accept the possibility held out by Ad Reinhardt's willfully ironic claim has everything to do with the fact that, in the general culture of late American art, "authority... is connected with the privilege to suppress and protect the body and the reference to social constraints the body inevitably unleashes and all the more voluminously for black artists."[10] For Ligon, no such privilege existed, and this amounted to a social constraint that warranted referencing. To yield his practice to abstraction would have risked submitting it to a singular and unaccommodating habitation where he desired a multiplicitous one.[11] For reasons not determined but exacerbated by his dissimilarities to the ur-abstractionist, Ligon sought to make his itinerancy functional in his art, to work the full conflict into the seemingly proscribed space of painting.

The tendency in Ligon's work to equivocate between distinct idioms remains at all times just that: a tendency, a constant disposition to move, *never to settle* in one site if it means pulling up stakes in another. One of Ligon's earliest text paintings exemplifies this disposition. It is *Untitled (I Am a Man)* (fig. 4.2), a work from 1988 that represents the iconic sign carried by marchers in the 1968 sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee. The painting fuses three ostensibly irreconcilable representational modes—the formalist painting, the political statement, and the private question—into something fraught but whole. The background, an allover painting in white that is vaguely penetrated from behind by



4.2 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988. Oilstick on canvas, 40 × 25 in. Collection and courtesy the artist. ALSO PLATE 9.

several darker tones (the "sign" is in fact painted in two layers, ground and figure/text, atop a riotous field of expressionist markings—a double cancellation), is overlaid by text that is painted comparatively crudely, its wavering outlines being the least confident gestures in the picture. However unstable in themselves, these two registers are utterly dependent on each another, as the sight of white ground peeking through the black letters affirms materially. Conspicuously destitute of graphic confidence, this sign stammers out "I *am* a man." As an assertion, it fails to convince.

We might mistake *Untitled (I Am a Man)* for a quintessentially postmodernist appropriation if Ligon had not elected to reposition the sign by constructing it into a sumptuous oil painting. In fact, the work is located as much in language-based conceptualism as in its physical manifestation as a painting, as much in a confident act of self-positing as in a questioning of that gesture. These contradictions and the refusal to prioritize them are fundamental to the picture's meaning. *Untitled (I Am a Man)* addresses us across several strong differences—abstract and figurative, work and text, history and the present—though not ambivalently. Though we may find it consoling to describe it in a way that resolves its constitutive difficulty—say, by calling it a graffitied monochrome or a conceptualist self-portrait—*Untitled (I Am a Man)* is of greatest interest when viewed in terms of its internal inconsistency. In this way, it becomes depictive of all the strained relations that make it intelligible in *any* way. By failing to state unequivocally whether it is painting or polemic, *Untitled (I Am a Man)* mixes impulses and means regarded as mutually exclusive in a kind of representational miscegenation. The best label for it describes an icon of Civil Rights struggle repositioned within a formalist painting that modifies our perception of both.

Despite their sure foreignness to the context of 1988 neoconceptualist art practice, Ligon saw in both these forms problems with which he

felt obliged to go on working. He was an eight-year-old in the Bronx when the event took place, and thus estranged from the marchers by at least a generation. This distance is registered within the painting: Ligon's version, in relation to the original in which the thickly printed slogan reaches nearly to the sign's edge with "am" in boldface and underlined, presents the letters as shrunken in size and withdrawn from the edge—a recession we might read as a kind of historical distance that interrupts the clarity as well as the politics of the image. Consequent upon this interruption is a mediation of the very real social distance separating gay men from the all-encompassing common denominator in black cultural politics, who is a straight male figure, standing apart from desires and interests that might dilute or compromise his representation of the black universal. Rather than seizing the image as a right, Ligon, the more contemporary figure in the relationship, is seen painstakingly, even nervously elaborating a relationship with the iconic sign and the figures for which it now stands. The result is an image of man not as the "personified abstraction" of man that is the basic unit of traditional politics, but rather as a more questing figures, one who finds its enfranchisement in a form that is both within and against standard politics, and particularly the imperative form of masculinity marshaled by that politics. Painting, in this instance, provides a visual language with which to scramble a message that might otherwise function transparently. It allows the strategic decomposition of an idealized, and to some political subjects harmful, self-image.

The political inscrutability of *Untitled (I Am a Man)* is only amplified by the comparably obscure position it takes on the aesthetic questions it raises. This position also pertains to a complicated matter of historical distance. When Ligon painted this work in 1988, painting involved a gamble for an artist interested in making political statements, the famously apolitical medium being supposed also to have suffered the

most histrionic yet of its many twentieth-century "deaths" during the 1970s and early 1980s. *Untitled (I Am a Man)*'s direct address betrays the conceptualist impulse in Ligon's work, with the possible difference that Ligon establishes situations that doubly implicate aesthetics and politics. In varied tones, his art will always state, "This is a public scene" to a viewer that Michael Warner, writing in another context, calls "a rhetorical addressee [who] is only a placeholder for others," whose invocation inaugurates a mediated, open-ended exchange of perspectives.[12]

The subject of Ligon's address is comparably capacious, and for that reason slow to come into view. Because in this painting the subject is equal parts original and pale facsimile, the work provides an opportunity to dispel two easy assumptions about the proliferation of first-person statements in these works: one is that Ligon's "I" is always his own; the other that, because Ligon is black, his implied addressee is white. As for the first assumption, Ligon appropriates fewer images than voices, and therefore first-person voices, including not only that of the sanitation workers but also those of writers, performers, and others. His voice is nearly always in deferral, guided off center by the inflections of the appropriated one. Ligon's "I" is in every sense already a site of representation. The second assumption (that Ligon's addressee is white) is undercut by the fact that the stark, monochromatic or dichromatic palette for which he is known functions less like a Manichean allegory of a finally absolute black/white difference, and more like a means to subvert the ingenous conception of the page merely as a two-dimensional site where language units innocuously assemble. The work's securest reference, it seems, is not to a subject or sign, but to the difficulty of achieving a firm ground upon which to base either construction. In this case, "subject" is no longer a common social denominator upon which an individual hangs a personality off of which meaning can, in turn, be read. It is instead a potentially unlimited prac-

tice of articulating and redrawing a place in the world (grammatically and aesthetically as well as socially and politically) and as a process that is elliptical and open by design. Its link to vision is at once proved and undermined when *I Am a Man* produces the image of a subject that disavows its completeness by occupying two places at once.

Ligon's problem was to devise a mode of painting—always an intensely bodily matter but especially so for him—in which to pursue some of the simultaneously vexing and exhilarating implications of the subject's vulnerability to what lay outside its borders. To confront such a desire is to meet head-on the problem of the *surface*—specifically, surface as a site of finishing or ending that in principle concludes the process of composition and inaugurates that of uptake (through forms of description, summation, representation, etc.) in other forms and mediums. In short, he confronts surface as that which makes an avowedly modernist assertion such as "We believe that we can find the end, and that a painting can be finished" an unwitting suppression of the contingency of the viewing position, a disacknowledgment of its power.[13] For political subjects whose existence as pictures for others is a kind of general condition, not to mention a nauseating and often catastrophic one, the fetishization of surface, or indeed any aesthetics that prescribes its supervaluation, presents a serious problem. The text paintings, I argue, forestall such a closure (to a degree) by withholding the kind of surface that stops an image at its borders and, by extension, seals off the viewer at hers. As part of his struggle with closure, Ligon creates art situations that implicate multiple themes, demanding viewers' engagement with the disclosure of this multiplicity while leaving the matter open. Many of the works I will discuss here exist in series typically installed as such, so that one's experience of them is paced by the progression of difference and similarity within a seemingly repetitive framework. The prevalence of Ligon's own shifted and shifting voice, too, dislodges the strong

purchase of the single artistic personality or the overall encounter. For the viewer, then, neither the "who?" nor the "what?" remains the same; the surface fails to give up the identity and instead becomes the site of a crisis of apprehension. In these ways, the work emphasizes individualized reception in order to establish the viewing situation as a site of risk and instability rather than consolation. In my view, this is how the work promotes recognition of our difficult relationship to closure—that debatable end which we always and at once want, fail to achieve, and militate against. Ligon's determination to thwart closures with art required a practice that could exceed its own space and become a part of ours, without being seen as completely the property of either. Thus, Ligon's work, as if possessed of an unconscious, is frequently split between polymorphous and partial drives, fitting into stylistic and cultural categories only by coercion.

The text paintings are best understood against the background of the transformations painting had undergone by the time Ligon started out.[14] As the de Kooning anecdote suggests, Ligon's impress by the advent of postmodernism was strong, and like critical postmodernism, Ligon's viewpoint on modernist practice is not limited to concerns about painting. Rather, the representational vocabulary Ligon developed reveals an engagement with modernism in all its fullness as a practical and theoretical discourse. Indeed, the artist is more involved with what Michael Fried in 1964 called the dialectic of modernism, which for Fried was "an ideal of action as radical criticism founded upon as objective an understanding of one's *situation* as one is able to achieve."[15] If Ligon holds fast to the possibility of this "ideal of action," in his hands it becomes radically embodied, partial, medium-nonspecific, and, for the viewer, participatory. For Ligon, continuing to work with modernism yet being mindful of its limitations meant supplementing the disciplinary practice of self-criticism with the cognizance that his "situation"

is inseparably social and political—a fact that implicates all his representations in an ungovernable complex of risky relations. Thus, in Ligon's practice, the dialectic obtains only to the extent that a work's attempt to provide a self-conscious account of itself will always be interrupted by each instance of its "inevitably embodied, and so interested (invested, desiring) reception."[16] This element is perhaps the most productive and critical of his practice, which enacts a deep revision of the exclusive model of sociality that inheres in that most dominant and debated variety of modernist conviction. This model depends on boundaries that are impossible to maintain yet nevertheless determine what relationships are possible *in* and *to* works of art. In this respect, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, like so much of Ligon's work, expresses a quandary highly specific to its time. By 1988, the prevailing forces in American art and art criticism had all but convinced themselves that the temperament of the most advanced new art could be understood as *either* modernist or postmodernist. And contemporary aesthetic discourse remains burdened by the assumptions that painting is by and large an index of modernism and that an absolute difference separates late modernism and postmodernism.[17] Ligon's practice consistently compromises that notion, amounting to a postmodernism that engages modernism deconstructively rather than dismissing it.[18]

In this respect, Ligon's practice remains close to the grain of critical postmodernism as it first emerged in the United States. Particularly germane here is a contention Douglas Crimp made in 1977 about then-new art in a number of mediums, at the core of which he observed "performance—and not only that narrowly defined activity called performance art, but [the effect of] all those works that were constituted *in a situation and for a duration by the artist or spectator or both together.*"[19] Ligon's account of de Kooning reflects a corresponding sense of situatedness. In that passage, Ligon invokes the rhetoric of canonical modernists such as

Hans Hoffman and Clement Greenberg, for whom a painting's meaningful operations occurred within the confines of push-pull and, at a certain point, the optical third dimension, both of them functionally bodiless schemes removed from the realm of the sensate insofar as they do not implicate or affect spectators' desire. Ligon's combinatory scheme, on the other hand, requires both. It is significant that *vision correction* "didn't diminish the painting at all" for him. Ligon's untroubled confidence in his strange encounters with the pirate centers on making literal what the classic modernist account could only abstract—that aspect of painting that survives the practical completion of a work and in being approached desirously becomes eroticized at the moment of viewer uptake. Among other things, the experience showed Ligon that sociality obtained even in abstraction, precisely because the optical and erotic dimensions are indisseverably linked to one another. Inherent in this account is an extraordinary hopefulness about representation, one rooted in the possibility of exceeding the limitations imposed by social categories and positions through supercharged depictions of their transgression.

Ligon's narrative, whose accuracy or truthfulness interests me less than its account of the viewing effects certain paintings produce, ends with a qualification: "Warhol understands that the depiction of flesh is one of painting's jobs as well, although he goes about it by using photographic means and letting our investments in the bodies depicted do the work."[20] In the context of Ligon's observations, what differentiates de Kooning and Warhol may seem less important than what connects them: an abstraction that restructures the image's familiarity to call attention to the ways we experience images. But for Ligon, Warhol affords a crucial distance from de Kooning's unabashed romanticizing, one that opens with the shift in emphasis from the power of paint to approximate the thrill of flesh to its power, developed in concert with a recognizable

image, explicitly to first seize and then surrender to the imaginary. That is, there is a shift of attention from the painter's right of dominion over subject and viewer, and toward the apparent right of the image over the disposal of its subject. What de Kooning overbearingly steers with "touch" or gesture, Warhol relinquishes somewhat to a mechanical intercessor. "Warhol understands," says Ligon, but he lets "our investments in the bodies . . . do the work." Moreover, the investments we have formed prior to our encounters with most of Warhol's imagery are likely of such strength that it little dampens their signifying power if his bodies lack the "flesh" de Kooning provides so bountifully (Ligon mentions in particular Warhol's celebrity portraits and the *Disasters, Shadow,* and *Piss* paintings).[21] Warhol captures the image's failure to produce a body and wryly installs this failure in richly structured works that only amplify the scope of a search destined for futility. If de Kooning's painting actually aims to produce an object of desire, Warhol's makes a flamboyant show of the wanting itself, or more precisely of its frustration. Yet like the other modernist codes that Ligon reworks not in order to assert their bankruptcy but rather to search out their contemporaneity through continued engagement, both lessons inform his painting in crucial ways.

Ligon paints out of an aesthetic impulse, a love of the object of painting: the chasing it and the getting there. Yet his investments proved too ranging, and his alertness to the ramifications of social position too acute, to allow luxuriating in the medium without an effort to specify its message. Importantly, during his formative period, Ligon complemented his largely materialist interaction with painting practices with close attention to the work of feminist artists seeking to disrupt modernist formal and political hegemonies. The use of language was one way by which their work, as Deutsche ably describes it, "advanced towards viewers, disengaging them from habitual modes of aesthetic reception, turning their attention away from the image and back on

themselves—or, more precisely, on their relationship to the image."[22] Particularly important were Jenny Holzer, Kruger, and Rosler, whose work employs language in ways that reveal and use art as a form of explicitly political communication. These artists' work provided conditions of possibility for the politics of representation mobilized in a wide range of practices (American and international) now associated with the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many of the most publicly engaged artists working in this vein during Ligon's early years were combining explicitly political content and direct address, and saw their practices as theoretical and political as well as artistic. This development had been concisely accounted for in 1983, when Craig Owens identified a "discourse of others," a combinatory critical practice that collapses the distance theory tends to maintain "between itself and its objects—a distance which objectifies and masters."[23] Evidencing those influences and his interest in collapsing that distance, Ligon's painting has focused intently on the physical manipulation of text and other previously printed matter. Words are the most prevalent images in Ligon's work, a result of his long and intimate engagement with literature. From a very early age, Ligon regarded literature as a place he could go to be fully himself—a quality that his painting later acquired, and which adds another valence to his selection of a door, of all things, as the support for his very first text paintings. That is, other people's words helped him to articulate a place for himself in the world, and this process meant for him a terminal oscillation between coming and going. (As it does for anyone caught in the gap between the comforts and the terrors of what is most familiar.) Ligon was particularly drawn to writers who pursued the vicissitudes of difference and who troubled the boundaries separating genres, disciplines, and cultural locations. "When I choose a text [to use in a work]," the artist says, "it's because I've had a very visceral reaction to it."[24] His work has drawn from the work of writers, including Zora

Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Mary Shelley, with whose work Ligon began to form strong bonds as early as middle school; the works of others, including Richard Dyer, Jean Genet, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Gertrude Stein came later. Despite sometimes sharp divergences in modality, style, and outlook, these writers share a highly sensitive eloquence about cross-cultural experience, and specifically about the difficulties and rewards that come from confronting audaciously its most durable conventions in regard to representation, sexuality, history, and politics.

Ligon puts their work to use in a very different kind of demonstration, one squarely situated in the visual and yet always purchasing heavily on what cannot be seen. In displacing the traditional image with the goal of restoring to the space of painting those real and imagined linguistic processes and durational events that make images *possible*, his text paintings are very much in the tradition of works by John Baldessari, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, and Ed Ruscha. Ligon's major difference from these artists is that he seems to give his text paintings over almost entirely to the elaboration of the text. This effect is perhaps clearest in works such as *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)* (1991; fig. 4.3). One does not just look at this painting but rather positions oneself like a reader before a text, scanning it from the top left of the two-foot-tall canvas and proceeding across and down until the work of the painting is done. The text, which quotes Ralph Ellison's 1955 novel, starts out legibly enough: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook. . . ." One continues reading till just above the midpoint of the work. Then, due to the paint gathering on the back of Ligon's stencil, the means of intervention itself (whose traces have been visible from line one) begins to mark the writing, disfiguring the letters, it seems, as quickly as Ligon can commit them to canvas. For the viewer, the entire bottom third of the picture becomes the site of an excavation to resurrect some sense of Ellison's text from the

I am an invisible man.
No, I am not a spook
like those who haunt
Edgar Allan Poe;
nor am I one of your
Hollywood movie ectoplasms; I am a man of
substance, of flesh and
bone, fibre and liquids
—and I might even be
said to possess a mind.
I am invisible, under-
stand, simply because

4.3 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)*, 1991. Oilstick on canvas with gesso, 34 × 20 in. Courtesy the artist.

work's coarse, emblackening facture. Ligon's meaningful action appears to be directed at clarifying aspects of the text *as literature*: Ellison's narrator, the clear rendering, and the subject they speak together. It seems that what is at stake here is the loss of the subject—even that of the reading self—to the symbolism it becomes when it is written and rewritten.

Indeed, the most strident gesture *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)* commits is the one with which Ligon frustrates reading. Yet such an interpretation has little to do with painting; according to it, there is only the text whose elaboration the painting obstructs or upsets. *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)* comes early in a body of text paintings produced during a period (between 1990 to 1994) when Ligon developed the page framework that all his text paintings seem to occupy (if only by situating language on a surface to be read), and when he reoriented the rudiments of his abstract painting practice to set them in a close relationship with writing or at least a more conventional sign-making procedure. In this work, the language component has as much if not more of the hefty, near-controlling frontality of *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)*, to the degree that painting appears to subserve or to facilitate the writing in it. The work appears concerned not simply to present language as a thing, but to make it and its effects on the subject(s) for whom it speaks the point of the representation. This appearance has led many of Ligon's most astute commentators, however, to limit these works to a textualization that conflates their painted aspect with their written one (which is so often merely simulated), thereby reducing each to so many marks for a reading.

Doubtless this ekphrastic strain is crucial for Ligon, perhaps most importantly because it allows him to hold onto not only our eyes but the specific region of our "imaging consciousness" that houses certain paradigms for black and male subjectivity; indeed Fanon compellingly described it as the most productive force in the racializing process.

Sartre held that "imaging consciousness," in its general function, imparts recognizability to things, insofar as it causes us to stop looking at a thing "for what it is, materially speaking, and insofar as consciousness steps back in relation to reality to produce as an image the object represented."[25] Ligon's most well-known text paintings—such as the four works in his 1992 *Prisoner of Love* series, which use words from Jean Genet's 1982 memoir of that name—deliberately incite the imaging consciousness through repetition (fig. 4.4). In these works, Ligon takes a choice phrase invoking cultural difference—"They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning"—and stencils it again and again in jet-black pigment, usually on a stark white background, until the phrase falls from legibility.[26] These works supply us with a kind of interminable, one-line script. As we read it, our consciousness goes "back" in relation to the reality (an unattributed "we") to retrieve an image of the word represented ("ink"), thus compelling us to notice the work of our imaging consciousness in filling the gaps, first between the objectivity of the word and the specificity of whatever image we conjure to satisfy its call for illustration, and second, between these and the unexpected, inassimilable plurality of forms the word takes on through its physical repetition.[27] By putting the spotlight on language work and language effects, and more precisely their multiplying not narrowing character, Ligon's work becomes a forum for him to explore his own relationships of fascination and complicity with representations of otherness that appear to implicate him, as well as to spatialize the terrain of objectifying written and spoken representations. At the same time, by making them *and the fullness of their implications*—subjects are both found(ed) and lost in their midst—present for the spectator as the apparent effect of a conjoined reading/looking action, the work has the potential to show how these effects and representations are germane to the viewing situation, indeed interfering with it.

4.4 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (Prisoner of Love #4)*, 1992. Oilstick on canvas with gesso, 80 × 30 in.

But all this is still more to do with reading than with looking. It is indeed an index of the difficulty of Ligon's work that one can easily forget one is looking at a painting. The specific danger of collapsing these paintings is that if we assume that the work's textuality exhausts its substance, we overlook the import of the transformation brought about when the word graduates to picturehood. The means by which they achieve that status are vital because these means are what we must focus on to determine what precisely Ligon's work amounts to, as an attempt to do something to verbal *and* visual languages—that is, to clarify a difference in value between the kinds of consciousness they can merely "reproduce" and the kinds of consciousness they can generate. What difference does it make that these are paintings? If Ligon's work "represents representation" (which it does), then how does it gain enough purchase on its source objects to become distinct from them? This is emphatically not to ask what "kinds" of images these are—image kinds are precisely what they trouble—but rather how that troubling is effected materially. Ligon draws from opposing modes of picture- or image-making and authorship to refer to the limits, and ideally transform the terms of representability itself. For this reason, his paintings necessitate a "reading" slow enough to make out the unusual demands this work makes on vision as well as on imaging consciousness.

The anecdote about *Pirate* betrays Ligon's determination to see painting in his own way. But his view of modernism is not a willful distortion; it is more like a magnification that exudes a rut in what appears an extremely tight weave. This exploration is rooted in the impossibility of disinterested looking, or more specifically, in an at once critical and sympathetic commitment to the interestedness of looking. We recall that in Ligon's account, the stress falls on the side of the viewer's desire, particularly its power literally to exploit an openness to investment "basic" to painting: "The materiality of the paint does the work, which

seems to be about the desire with which we approach the bodies of others."[28] Ligon locates at the heart of the encounter between viewer and work an identificatory process wherein what the work does (that is, its action as well as its meaning) is "*about* the desire" with which it is approached. Obviously this position on painting is, in terms of its frankness, diametrically opposed to a position *for which painting exists*, waiting to reveal itself to the knowing, not feeling, spectator to whom "painting and sculpture can become more completely nothing but what they do; like . . . the machine, they *look* what they *do*."[29] In such a situation as Ligon describes, materiality and desire (or more schematically, work and viewer) are not distinct but codependent, translating one another in a process that prevents either from achieving a secure location.[30] This, I want to suggest, is a linchpin in both the construction and the experience of Ligon's text paintings.

The perplexity that Ligon's text paintings invite us to inhabit through their evasive textures has a counterpart in the social that is brilliantly explored in Diana Fuss's work on the theory of identification, the socially embedded psychic process that makes identity possible and whose resistance of closure compromises the claims we make in its name. Because the subject is crucial to this discussion, I will cite Fuss at length:

> Identification is the psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition. Identification inhabits, organizes, instantiates identity. . . . Identification, understood . . . as the play of difference and similitude in self-other relations, does not, strictly speaking, stand against identity but structurally aids and abets it. Yet at the same time that identification sets into motion the complicated dynamic of recognition and misrecognition that brings a sense of identity into being, it also immediately calls that identity into question. The astonishing capacity of identifications to reverse and disguise

> themselves, to multiply and contravene one another, to disappear and reappear years later renders identity profoundly unstable and perpetually open to radical change. Identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity.... [I]t is precisely identity that becomes problematic in and through the work of identification.[51]

From the start, Ligon has used mass-produced, disposable plastic stencils to apply text to canvas. While the distancing and depersonalizing effect of the stencil seems to impede the identificatory energy described above, in fact it catalyzes it by making the work's subject all the more mechanical (or, as one might say, impersonal), thereby opening the structure of the work to investments from outside. Jonathan Flatley, in an excellent study of Warhol's early silkscreen portraits, understands this process similarly. Discussing Warhol's redress to the "hyperembodiment [that] serves as a continual obstacle to power and pleasure" in the public sphere for female, black, queer, and other minoritized subjects, Flatley observes that the portrait "is conceived of not in relation to a 'real person' but in relation to the process of reproducibility itself, and so we can say that Warhol worked from a model rather than an 'original.' The 'person' disappears from the process as if she never existed." Flatley attributes the "mournful structure" of Warhol's portraits (which began with pictures of Marilyn Monroe that, Warhol claimed, were inspired by her death) with providing "the mechanism that enables his fan identification with the celebrity" and that makes the portraits themselves "embodiments of the fantasies of identification specific to the fan."[52] Warhol's ostensibly distancing mechanization of the painting process in fact throws the work open to a potentially infinite play of identifications.

For Ligon, the stencil functions in a comparably interventionary way with respect to both extant representations of black (male) subjectivity and, I think, painting's "native" identity. Ligon denaturalizes both by slowing down and thus revealing their complex representational makeup, perhaps most dramatically by rendering their incorporations as failed, which is to say as disintegrating identifications.

In what could be considered an indispensable expression of the historicity of his practice, Ligon in 1993 took this strategy directly to the cultural representational matrix that positions him as an "American abstract painter of color" (it is by such rhetorical tactics that integrative practice attains visibility by means of a qualification that resegregates it) when he created *The Triumph of American Painting* (fig. 4.5) with Byron Kim.[33] The painting reproduces a number of lines from a section of Irving Sandler's 1970 survey of abstract expressionism in the United States devoted to the painting of Mark Rothko.[34] A squarish rectangle nearly eight feet tall, the painting works hard to evoke both the text and its subject. Yet the difficulty of getting Rothko's painting "into view" defines one's experience of this work. The ambience of the picture is generic, even harshly so, as if after the manner of a designless poster or product label. If terms like "myriad pulsations," "overwhelming," "dematerialize," and "atmosphere" leap out, it is because they are in affective charge, so at odds with the plainness of their presentation *as words* and the distance of such spare presentation from the rich psychical environments they might create for some viewers. Put simply, the painting is an image of beholding, one whose effect, moreover, can thematize the strangeness of the practice. *Triumph* is an image of beholding that remarks the depsychologized space between the viewer-critic and an object as an explicitly psychological one. The borders, or surfaces, that would demarcate beholder from beheld are so deeply and fully imbricated that they become a single surfaceless image in which text and the

myriad pulsations generated by minute surface changes give rise to an overwhelming chromatic sensation. The all-pervading impression is intensified by the field effect, the environmental size of the pictures, and the illusion of atmosphere generated by the thinly coated color. The subtly stained and blotted modulations of color that dematerialize both surfaces and contours transform the rectangular planes into blocks of colored ether. The blurring of the edges prevents the shapes from hardening and dislodges them, causing them to hover outward, enveloping the viewer in the luminous aura they radiate. Conversely, the rectangles also seem to recede, turning into layers of veils that shroud some mysterious presence that one is made to feel is there and to which one must penetrate. As one does in suspenseful reverie, one feels drawn into vast apparitional spaces that threaten to dissolve both the viewer and his world. At the same time the frontal parallel patterns accentuate the picture plane and counteract the sense of depth, preventing the surface from vaporizing too much. Although each eroded rectangle is dis-

4.5 Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 1993. Oilstick on linen, 80 × 62 in. Collection and courtesy the artist. ALSO PLATE 10.

supratextual inscription of picturing consciousness collide. By displacing its stresses, Ligon and Kim frustrate the rhetorical action by which the critic's "one" would become "anyone" (in service to disinterest). And so into the place where the textual dynamics of sheer demonstration should be come rushing all the associations one can handle of the encounter that made the words possible. No matter what their amount or content, these associations will block the view of Sandler's intended referent—painting in its purest state—and introduce yet another network of desires (the viewer's) into the transaction. But the emphases in this painting fall on the first order of desire, as betrayed by the explicitly erotic connotations of the grammar Sandler assigns to the effects of Rothko's picture. *Triumph* removes Sandler's text by several degrees from its status as a functional (descriptive) demonstration of Rothko's technique and its effects. The text now documents an event of interpretation whereby art, its language, and its appointed interpreters collectively enter history through carefully orchestrated series of actions, or critical moves. In this way Sandler's text—owing both to its exploded (human) scale and impregnable, not declamatory, structure—comes forward as a document of a singular social form, as one of many postures one might assume before a painting.

In this picture of posture, the characteristic attributes are, first, the nature of the desire with which the formal critic approaches painting and, second, the strenuousness of his effort to conceal that desire's origination in nothing more complicated than a charged physical interface with a thing in the world. Ligon's painstaking process—each word is several inches long and makes its own claim upon the viewer—renders the calculation and construction of Sandler's statements as a singular kind of determination. The open justification slows the flow of Sandler's text just enough to evidence the impossibility of critical detachment and transform an instance of formal criticism into an image of formal

criticism *at work*, meticulously styling the object at hand into a signifier of technical achievement. Note especially the attention given to the preservation of surfaces in Sandler's account. By conjuring out of Rothko's painting "spaces that threaten to dissolve both the viewer and his world," Sandler displays a canny preservation instinct that is peculiar to the modernist critic. Flatness wields its otherworldly power heroically, saving the "viewer and his world" in the nick of time (*Triumph* is nearly terminated when it reaches the scene) as, we are told, "the frontal parallel patterns accentuate the picture plane and counteract the sense of depth, preventing the surface from vaporizing too much."

Reading these words is an intense experience. Ligon, like the art historian who parses an image to extract a telling gesture concealed within its whole, compels Sandler's constructed image to produce its constructor and moreover to specify *Sandler's* interest. The superheroic action is the rhetoric's own. By relegating the work its place, Sandler preserves his. Both works ratify the view, expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that "the grip of conceptual structures can only be undone by a radical libidinal force."[35] Whereas Sandler secrets libido within the conventions of art and beholding, *Triumph* reveals it as an ineradicable condition of beholding. Libido registers here not only in the stirring allusiveness of Sandler's prose but in the desire (to expose and revise painting so as to go on painting) that their painting helps Ligon and Kim to express. In this regard, *Triumph* performs close reading, in the sense T. J. Clark gave the term (though in reference to a different kind of object) as one "in which the object is always being seen against (as *part* of) a ground of interest and argument." In this type of reading, "objects are attended to as instances of a certain history."[36] In *Triumph*, the "certain history" is that of Sandler's encounter with Rothko's paintings and his subsequent writing that register Sandler's investment in Rothko's painting (Sandler refers to no particular example in the excerpted passage).

The triumph of American painting is thus given over to the aggrandizing documentation of an *event* as if it were but a happening.

If *Triumph* frustrates the unity into which formal criticism would fuse work and beholder, it is by making the structure and specificity of the relationship a part of its representation. The effect of this modification, of course, is to make room in the discourse of painting for an investigation into the perceptual conditions and conventions of art that can accommodate a positioned, culturally specific subject. That "color" and "surface" are multiply connotative terms for Ligon—as well as for Kim, both being painters and "artists of color"—marks *Triumph*, also, as an important dialogue between two moments in, and positions on, the histories of abstract painting, representation, and American culture. The first moment, of course, is the familiar one the picture somewhat forces Sandler himself to caricature. The second, however, redescribes a kind of engaged painting practice that is self-critical in the sense that it examines how conditions of perception are differentially conditional and affected by specificities to do with desire, language, history, race, sexuality, and power. Indeed, although as I've said Sandler mentions no specific works in this discussion of Rothko, in the 1982 edition of the text from which Ligon and Kim worked, the excerpted discussion is illustrated by a densely fleshy painting comprising phenotypically suggestive tones of brown, gray, and black. Read opportunistically, this coincidence casts a noticeably eroticized, "racial" tinge onto the notion of "veils that shroud some mystical presence that one is made to feel is there and to which one must penetrate."[37] In this respect, *Triumph* typifies Crimp's observation that, in postmodernist art practices, "underneath each picture there is always another picture."[38] Because in such work "processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging" constitute the strategies, to forfeit the "stratigraphic activity" required to describe it is to consign the work's meaning to what can be mapped on its

surfaces.[39] The textualization of Ligon's text paintings, for all its ease, must at a certain point dismiss their resistance to the kind of presentness that describes what is at once both "a transcendent condition . . . in which '*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*'"[40] (which we might mistake as somehow peculiar to modernist aesthetics) and an indispensable effect of the process of cultural objectification (which we would not). Rather, *Triumph*, like all Ligon's text paintings, achieves its effect (whatever effect) *in a situation* and *for a duration* by the artist or the spectator or both together.[41] The work's presence and the temporality therein give way to a performance of the powerful evocation of an image withheld, a withholding that both marks the radical insufficiency of the text and pushes to the fore a picture of the critic's concerted libidinal and cultural labors to convey what he had already incorporated.

But *Triumph* is no mere anthropology or psychology of criticism. Its more important work is to demonstrate how modernist rhetoric pulls along in its wake the very social content it works so hard to shake off: that is, by presenting the embodied if suppressed difficulties, such as flatness, that define late-modernist painting, against itself, as functions of relationships *external* to painting. These are relations of an undoubtedly social kind, which conscript works of art for purposes lying well beyond the interests of art itself. In this way, *Triumph*, too, remarks "painting in general"—the historical-ideological category that Sandler's survey buttresses and this painting seeks ambivalently to enter—as in all moments partly an expression of the specific needs that give it a purpose. To that end, the viewer is engaged in the fomenting of this desirous scene by the excerpt's isolation of a kind of suspense narrative lurking within Sandler's account, constructed around the paced articulation of "surface changes" preceding the advance and subsequent retreat of the rectangles. The mystical actions of Rothko's discomfitingly self-possessed color are finally brought to a halt in what comes over as a sur-

prisingly violent encounter with difference: "Although each eroded rectangle is disembodied, it reads as a more or less finite container, [and] the ominous presence is therefore materialized." In fact none of the paintings illustrating Sandler's discussion of Rothko has the sort of strictly rectangular form suggested by "a more or less finite container"; it is precisely Rothko's suspension of that strictness that generates the works' characteristic effects. Yet it would hardly be fair to objectify only Sandler's desire to make the picture give up realities that it pretends to contain, as if in identifying it so we do not ourselves do the same in seeking to get *behind* Sandler's rhetoric to the source material it vaporizes. *Triumph*'s distinction comes in recognizing that in the latter desire inheres "in the very nature of our relationship to pictures."[42] This is of course a social relationship, one that much modernist criticism would rather imagine to be an incidental facilitator of the practice of knowing description, or a magnification of truths that might otherwise remain opaque. It betrays its sociality in its clear dependence upon the image of inconvenient or uneven intersubjective relations to supply the metaphors most effective for seeing that the territory of the viewing subject is not compromised. Thus, while *Triumph* produces an intense desire for painting, it also satisfies one (or two). By radiating desire outward so as to imbue the viewer's situation with it (it is the *lack* of a secure referent or correspondent illustration that fixes one's interest), *Triumph* clears a space for an understanding of painting that operates in the awareness that is internal neither to painting's own formal relationships nor to our relationship to them, but rather is actively pursued through a discursivization that draws both these realms of practice into a single procedure we call "painting." At over seven feet high, *Triumph* suggests a direct transliteration of one of Rothko's most celebrated, monumental works (*any* of them, in fact)—thereby mimicking physically, in addition to verbally, the function of the critical demonstration. By yielding an

embodied, contingent reality that Sandler's prose would contain, *Triumph* demonstrates most clearly that Sandler's picture of Rothko is a translation, not a demonstration. *Triumph* seizes the opportunity accorded the formal critic, but available to anyone, to make the art that she needs. The multiple indices of Sandler's need clearly undermine the fluency with which the modernist "picture," via the critic's enablement, speaks the undifferentiated world it is said to condense. *Triumph*, in other words, delivers Rothko's image in what may be its purest contemporary form: painting as it is generalized out of the supposedly universal, but in fact extremely specific, desiring experience of the agent whose authority continues both to feed on and to sustain the image's vitality as a cipher of historical and cultural value. *Triumph*, in this sense, portrays painting as a many-layered figure of this authority, or at any rate as a material and institutional practice that, as Jacques Derrida has described the "nondiscursive arts," "correspond[s] to a linguistic scene." In this view, wherein the authority functions as the signatory of painting, words are at work on paintings "whether they know it or not; they are in the process of letting themselves be constructed by words."[43] *Triumph* situates Sandler's words as abettors to an abstractive process that puts a certain kind of painting out of reach for those who lack the privilege or the desire to suppress the body.

This countercritical action allows Ligon and Kim to bring painting back to earth, as it were, to restore it to its location in the world of differently grounded and invested subjects—in short, to make possible for themselves an abstract painting practice that does not eviscerate the subject. By reworking the record of Sandler's perception into that of an encounter, *Triumph* enlarges the scope of what is representable within a paradigm in which, as Harold Rosenberg described the reigning New York art world ideology in 1977, "the individual is supposed to transcend the social category to which he belongs."[44] (What distinguishes this

modernism is its deployment of a specialized perception that grants no structural acknowledgment to the position from which its discernment is possible. Thus what is bracketed in order to attain its special focus, along with the ethics of taking such a focus to the knowing exclusion of constituent elements, must also be isolated as ineffable—a matter for nonart or the worst kind of literalism. This is of course the primary locus of the challenge posed to modernism by minority subjects combating longstanding beliefs in, or sanctioned ignorance about, the "essential" character of vision in more realms than aesthetics.) Moreover, Ligon and Kim created this painting at a time when critical art practices undertaken from the standpoint of difference had largely abandoned traditional mediums such as painting. (Indeed, 1993 was the year Ligon debuted his first phototext work, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* of 1991–93, at the Whitney's "Black Male" exhibition. As Richard Meyer points out, this was also Ligon's first work on an explicitly gay theme.)[45] *Triumph*, then, effected the visibility of a practice alternative to *both* frameworks. It posits a counterdiscourse of painting—counter to "itself," in the limited sense that painting now is what modernism helped it to become; and counter to the prevailing necessity that new positions need always to be staked without reference to those positions they oppose—that formulates an oppositional interpretation of Ligon and Kim's commitments and desires as subjects. In this way, *Triumph* indicates its contemporaneity in emphatically historical terms; "form . . . obliged to incessantly renew itself to keep alive" attains a decidedly different kind of interest.[46]

Triumph fashions a chiasmic network of four relevant types of artwork—Rothko's painting, Sandler's reading, Kim's reading and Ligon's painting—providing another example of Ligon's text paintings' use of cross-referential movement through image and word to complicate their textualization. Just as the excessive literalization of the picture

preempts or protracts, but in any case defocuses, visualization, the awkward, loosely spaced justification of the text invites a view beyond it to a canvas that appears strangely neglected. Neither the page nor the painting quite captures what this work is. In this way, Ligon forestalls the closure of meaning around either term. Moreover, neither can fully achieve itself without remaining partly its other. This coimplication of the one with the other—as between Sandler and his object, which ended with a violent capture—constitutes *Triumph*'s critique. That the text paintings continually inaugurate but *never bring to a close* such exchanges of figures and grounds is what makes them fundamentally *about* the relations they model in the course of their elaboration. They dwell in the ongoingness of discursive action, that action which resists gathering in forms that produce the kind of fluent image that assures us that "at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest." The majority of Ligon's text paintings address the indispensable value of this fluency for ideological procedures that would produce subjects for black culture. As we have seen, such operations partly function by summoning black artists to subserve the promulgation of social abstractions with "positive images" absent any serious critique of intraracial hegemonies such as heterosexism, presuffragist sexism, and aesthetic nativism. Ligon's text paintings concentrate our focus on the work required to access (liberate?) works of art that appear, or are assumed to be, committed to the innerness of their own space but in fact are structured openly—and this partly due to their performing rather than concealing their references. That is, the closest thing to a principle governing the text paintings' apparent implications for our understanding of "black art" issues from a conception of blackness as lacking precisely what the essentialist most needs to believe it provides: all the durable models one could need to solve one's private dilemmas. Rather, it is built up in units,

giving form as well as taking it, forming as well as deforming in a live and unstable circuitry of deposits and disbursements. When this blackness gathers in Ligon's work, it does so in pictures that freely cite and reference meanings gathered elsewhere not to clarify their own intent but to acknowledge their endangerment, to build in the kinds of risk to self that make statement not only possible but necessary.

One way to account precisely for the resultant images is to describe them as pictures without surfaces. To put it another way, they are pictorial forms that inhabit the categorical space of the image—pictoriality, in this case: the plenitudinous end product of essential vision—for the pleasure of postponing its closure. Probably no more vexing proposition could be put to one invested in an identity politics of knowing one's place. But I am suggesting, here as previously, that there is a likely more effective because certainly less constraining politics to be founded in *not* so knowing.[47] Ligon's quotational drive is, to me, expressive of just this kind of commitment. His adoption of serially repeated quotations that are derived from a contradictory range of sources entailed a rejection of the ideal of the creative black consciousness that exists prior to experience, waiting to be occupied, as well as the model of a self unmodified throughout its contacts with its world. With this rejection, there is a concomitant recognition of the incorporative, border-breaching effect of the identifications, which make identities possible in the first (unrepresentable) instance. While social formations might seek for reasons of integrity, and even at times survival, to control their members' identificatory practices, such control is impossible, for identifications are occurring and identities being reoriented to subjects and to themselves every time a subject finds herself in a context that requires her to found a relationship to an other. It is the recognition of identificatory practices' ability to render an identity an incoherent, obstructing disposition

toward a world one must inhabit with others, and specifically their "unique versions" of what one is oneself, that caused our most sophisticated theorists of "identity politics" to turn attention to the differences *within* identities. Thus Diana Fuss writes, "What is significant about . . . the constitution of the subject (the 'I') in language is that it shifts the grounds of the debate away from a consideration of the identity of things in themselves towards an analysis of *identity statements*."[48]

Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man) impels this shift in emphasis by constituting an identity statement as at once a recognizable event of writing (not Ligon's own) and a protracted event of painting in which the former is assimilated to a new representational context. Ligon reinforces these maneuvers by multiplying, rather than clarifying or singularizing, the connections between the "works of art" at hand and the individual selves from which they issue. As an effect of a material Ligon does not just appropriate Ellison's voice and adopt his protagonist's thematic invisibility but asks what the terms of visibility are that the prior accumulation of effects allow him. Indeed, in the repeated quotation, Ligon found a dadaesque manner to insist that there may be no means to secure a connection between author and work. But he also found a way to make that separation evident, by material means that begin as early as the painting's top third to unhinge the "grammar of the aesthetic personality"[49] specific to his source and scramble it with his own disjunct one.

In such a work, there is no designated starting or ending point for description; no demarcating border, uniquely the work's own, beyond which differences cannot pass. In respect to providing ways to think the politics of representation, such works perform at least two interconnected functions worth underlining here: first, because they do not speak or hold out a paradigmatic black male subject but a counterideological one figured in dispersal, they distance themselves from the sub-

jects as whose summary representation they might be mistaken; and second, they capitalize on this consciousness of multiplicity to ratchet open their surface, reorienting it around a constitutional openness. The text paintings' material specificity also aids them in resisting the abstractions and thematizations awaiting them via that subfunction of the "imaging consciousness" that transforms artworks into racial objects, in the form of black art. The achievement of density best describes the result of Ligon's pursuit of formal means not just to convey but to instrumentalize the quality of ongoingness that characterizes his "obsessive" relationship to the texts he excerpts.[50] Indeed, Ligon's words are very obviously *handled* to the point of dismemberment in these works. The appearance of his text paintings is not uniform but rather varies according to four factors under his control during their creation: the precise pressure used to create them, the temperature in the studio at the time of their creation, the conditions during drying (which takes up to two weeks), and the degree of their manipulation once dry.

In works with light backgrounds such as the ones I've discussed thus far, these marks so colonize the space between the lowermost lines (often visibly ruled) that they form a mass unto themselves. The monochrome text paintings exacerbate this condition dramatically, as *Stranger in the Village #13* (fig. 4.6), a monumental work from 1998, makes painfully clear to the viewer. In this work—one of several that excerpt text from a 1953 essay by James Baldwin about his self-exile from the United States to a rural outpost in the Alps—the text disappears into a field almost totally annexed by an unbroken surface of black paint coarsened with sparkling black coal dust, a fuel byproduct Ligon cast across the drying paint. The work's entire facing surface, then, is coated in a glistening, more or less uniform combination of pigments and additives. At twelve feet wide and seven high, it is a demonstrative work requiring no effort whatsoever to see. Yet its already gross dimensions

4.6 Glenn Ligon, *Stranger in the Village #13*, 1998. Enamel, oil, acrylic, gesso, and coal dust on canvas, 183 × 335 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation.

seem to increase by exponents when one notices the message embedded in its surface, at which point one must begin to perform fitful calisthenics in order to gain even the slightest sense of what the picture *says*. Tonal and surface-ground contrasts are so diminished that, when the text appears, it looks to be the effect of relief rather than addition.

More often than not, the effort to extract sense from these impacted masses of pigment seems pointless. This pointlessness, however, causes a fundamental transformation in the markings' character, one obliging us to remain engaged as they cease to be syntactical gestures or grammatical units and begin forming shapes. As physical accretions, they seem to demonstrate the enormous force of the work language does, giving literal form to the "battering down" of which Frantz Fanon speaks at the moment of his assailment by the historico-racial schema. Yet that experience, at least in Fanon's retelling, is instantaneous, an interpellation: "Mama! Look!" Whereas this experience is durational; it *takes time*, measured in minutes, to reach the bottom of the canvas from the top. For this reason, one cannot but see the accretions as the consequence of the purposeful action initiated in the upper register of the picture. This shape is more evidently the result of the work Ligon does *upon* language, to denature it. This elective inscrutability converts the evidentiary properties of language and image into an obdurate residue of the difficulty entailed in attempting to distort their overwhelming clarity.

Such masses have a topography that is hard to call a surface. For even though the massing of abstracted letter forms becomes complete at a certain point in nearly all Ligon's text paintings,[51] the mind knows that they are pictures that can be *read* as can a text. We have a certain difficulty, then, reconciling the "readable picture" in the work with what the eye sees, an abstract object-mass that cannot be read in the same way. In other words, almost no matter how hard one tries, one can neither stop nor go on reading such a picture. It is in this sense that the work is,

strictly speaking, without a surface: because it occupies the domains of both verbal and visual images at once, but each so partially that neither dominates our understanding.

The import of this dual-staking, I think, is more complicated than the dead end of a "doubleness" wherein each text painting is both a text and a painting. Out of the ceaseless alternation of verbal and textual surfaces that characterizes the text paintings, I think we might discern a refusal to provide another kind of surface, both of whose senses these works capture. The first sense Ligon identified in one of the functions of black art, whose production, he remarked, "has been so tied with the project of proving our humanity."[52] The second refers to the bounded plane behind which a work of art must remain in order to satisfy any critical operation (the present one included!) seeking to transform it into a soft landing pad for the decipherments of an eye and mind working "merely in disinterest" to what the work wholly manifests, or proves. In order for such proofs to ground knowledge, their vehicles must remain in place. We recall that minimalism's refusal to do this—that is to address itself above all to "immediacy, directness, and wholeness of effect"—is precisely what made it, for Fried, literalist, something expressive of the condition we inhabit "most or all of our lives" and from which art should offer a graceful release.[53] One of the signal attributes of such work is that it enters an improper (for art) relationship with its beholder by being "placed not just in his space but in his *way*"[54] and so has to be set aright:

> We distance it. And our inclination to do this amounts in effect to a desire to escape the work, to break its grip on us, to destroy the intimacy it threatens to create, to pull out. And one doesn't step back or pull out just a little, or more or less. (The relevant comparison here is with human relationships.) One is either in or out: and if one steps back, whatever the grip of the thing was or may have been is

broken or forestalled, and whatever the relationship was or may have been is ended or aborted.[55]

Ligon's text paintings get in our way, too, but cannot be "aborted" by our simply stepping back. I want to suggest that this relationship is secured, made necessarily intimate, by what is perhaps the primary effect of Ligon's excessive facture: the volumetric presence which turns text to thing as Ligon's pigment builds up on its way to the lowermost reaches of the canvas. On the textualist reading, this accumulation literally disarticulates the quoted statement, reflecting the receding strength of essential meanings and the text's authority over its ostensible subject. But attention to the specific texture of the painting shows that, in the viewing situation, this accumulation has a far profounder and more discomforting effect, since it indicates the markings' gradually more unsure relationship to their mooring, their approach toward the viewer's space. Indeed, they advance with a more explicitly racialized version of the "overwhelming chromatic sensation" that had for Sandler "threaten[ed] to dissolve both the viewer and his world." The component of the pictures that has to be read—the title or text that speaks in, as, or for blackness—is but a means to a colonization of the space between the beholder and the work, the reader, and the read. It is a condition of entering these paintings that we permit them to enter us, and thereby to understand ourselves as implicated in their production.

Some works make this appeal more overtly than others, making direct reference to human scale in an apparent effort to overtake "imaging consciousness" and activate a body consciousness strong enough to secure visceral identification (and an unmistakable sense of *situation*). Ligon's earliest text paintings saw him stencil lines drawn from (and responding to) Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 short story "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"—sentences such as "I feel most colored when I am thrown

against a sharp white background"—while limiting himself to the space available on the back of a door that was lying around his studio. In one such work, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown against a Sharp White Background)* (1990–91; fig. 4.7), the picture plane measures eighty by thirty inches, its slightly elongated proportions scaled to accommodate the human body. The first-person voice of the text amplifies this effect, but Hurston's relativistic description of racial blackness as a figure that gathers density when thrown against a white field specifies the effect. (Ligon has also painted these words directly on the walls of art galleries and museums, interrogating the representative function of the work within a more specific institutional frame.) Heightening the drama of the subject-to-subject relationship that the massed black pigment sets up, as it accumulates in the lowermost reaches of the work, it slouches, requiring a gaze like the one we make to a quiescent body lying on the ground. Once an identification is established with this pile of language, this materialized persona, the effort one must make to break it is not merely psychic or philosophic, but ethical.

Stressing the figure-ground relationship in this way troubles the activities of "distancing" reading and looking, by creating an erosion of the material bases upon which they occur. By converting the viewer-work relation into one of an interdependence that is permanently dynamic and privileges neither term, the work creates a situation akin to what William James characterized as the "zone of insecurity in human affairs in which all the dramatic interest lies." Because it is formative, there is no possibility of representing this condition authoritatively, only partially and provisionally. Of this zone, James appositely asks: "Do we not here grasp the race-differences in the making, and catch the only glimpse it is allotted to us to attain of the working units themselves, of whose differentiating action the race-gaps form but the stagnant sum?"[36] Unless the viewer of the door-size text paintings is close to the

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MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST
A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND. I FEEL MOST

4.7 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990–91. Oilstick and gesso on panel, 80 × 30 in. Collection Max Protetch, New York.

floor, the identification that takes place will involve something of the difference that separates standing persons from slumping ones or, say, victor from vanquished. In this way Ligon's work does not simply get "in the way" of the beholder; it undoes beholding by involving us in an intimacy that is *at one and the same time* a byproduct of the mutual colonization that constitutes viewing a work of art in its fullness, *and* a dramatic two-party staging of "race-differences in the making."

Textualization is a necessarily partial way to come to terms with the text paintings because it overlooks the language's role in material operations that address a specific language of "visual" form. The two components collaborate, in fact, to make the text paintings "literalist" in the strictest sense of that term, but also to direct them against the model of sociality embedded in the challenge with which literalism confronted modernism. It is right there, in the parenthetical statement that clarifies the threat literalist art poses to Fried's modernism: "The relevant comparison here is with human relationships." Or more precisely, with the kind of obstacle such relationships pose to the inexorable forward march of abstraction as a critical project. Aborting the specificity of the "working units" in a viewing situation does not merely accommodate representational abstraction; this operation is *itself* an abstraction. In this regard, the explicitly political definition of "abstraction" is germane. In a discussion of the rhetorical work done by the "preamble of every democratic proclamation 'all people without regard to (race, sex, religion, wealth, social status),'" Slavoj Žižek reminds us: "[we] should not fail to notice the violent act of abstraction at work in this 'without regard to': it is an abstraction of all positive features, a dissolution of all substantial, innate links, which produces an entity strictly correlative to the Cartesian *cogito* as a point of pure, nonsubstantial subjectivity."[57]

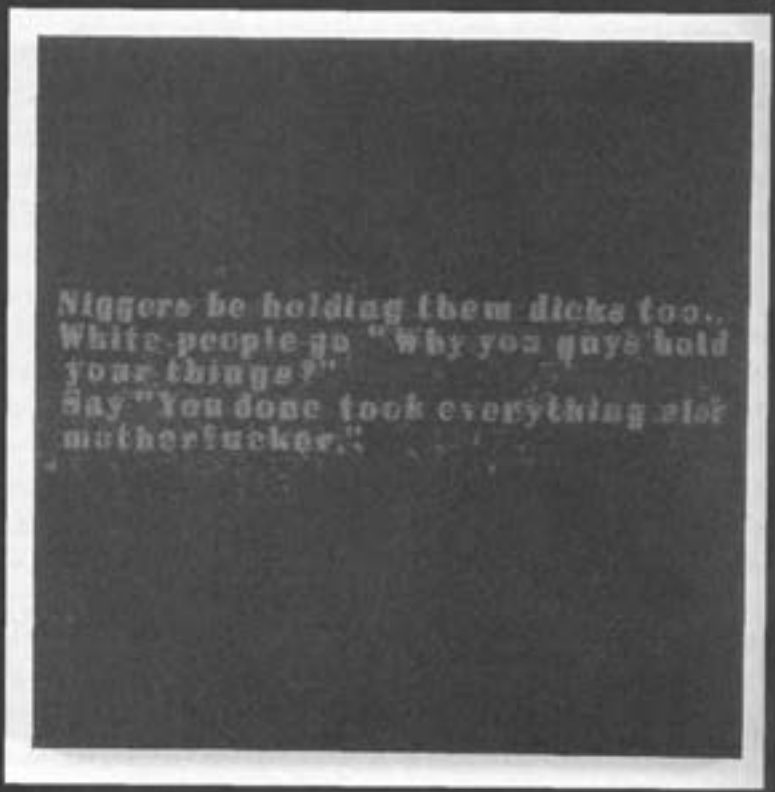
Ligon's text paintings need to remain surfaceless in order to foreclose such abstraction and to continue the process inaugurated in the works

discussed thus far: not to reflect but to *achieve* a texture of their own. This is a process out of which no secure identity can emerge—of neither figure nor ground, text nor picture, appropriator nor appropriated, spectator nor subject—since an identification structured into the encounter connects each to what it is not. Indulging identification to this degree requires that we rearticulate the kind of "risk" the other poses. To that end, Ligon's text paintings occasionally have indulged risky materials that would appear to diminish the texture of subjectivity that makes generalizing representations a problem in the first place. Yet, as Richard Meyer observes, they use "disappearance to figure the limits and absences that lie at the heart of identity."[38] A series of works Ligon initiated in 1993 brings this interest in "limits and absences" equally to bear on a pair of unlikely bedfellows, the monochrome painting and the sexual stereotypes of black masculinity. Here, too, coercive identifications that effect disappearances (here, of black gay difference) emerge, only now to consider another type of cultural phenomenon that seems to offer as much pain as it does pleasure.

Cocaine (Pimps) (1993; fig. 4.8) approaches rather than is approached: already a thirty-two-inch-square painting, evenly coated in cherry-red acrylic, as the viewer draws near it shouts "Niggers" into the quiet of the gallery. Ligon has centered a Richard Pryor joke just above the midpoint of the field, transcribed directly from an LP:[39]

> Niggers be holding them dicks too . . .
> White people go "Why you guys hold your things?"
> Say "You done took everything else motherfucker!"

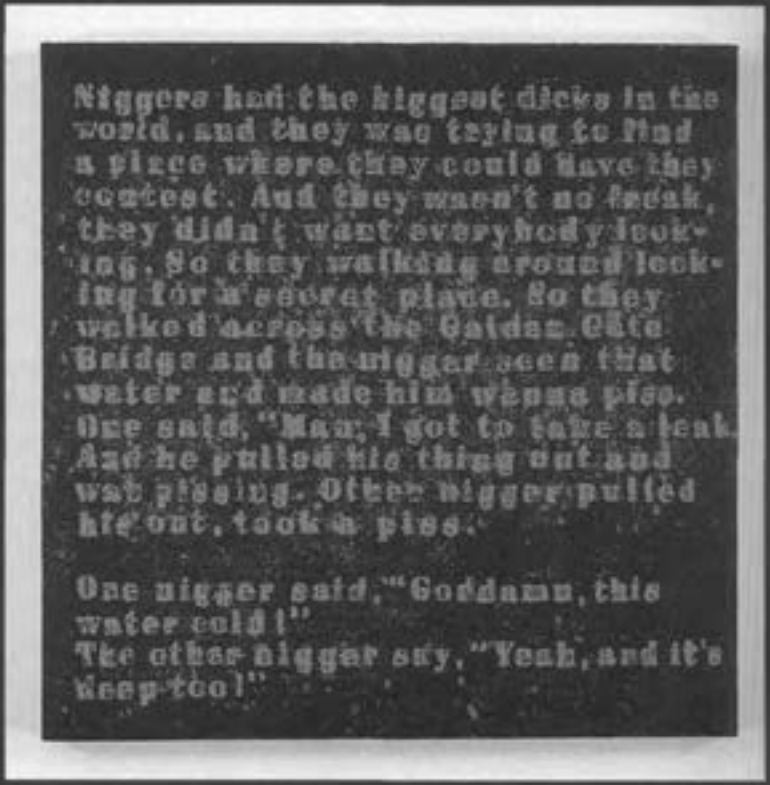
Cocaine (Pimps)—which is to say, the action described, the logic of the dialogue, the painting, its consumption—brings about a situation that is in every sense one of shared fixation. From even a moderate distance,


Niggers be holding them dicks too..
White people go "Why you guys hold
your things?"
Say "You done took everything else
motherfucker."

4.8 Glenn Ligon, *Cocaine (Pimps)*, 1993. Oilstick and acrylic on linen, 32 × 32 in. Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York. Courtesy Fisher Landau Center for Art. ALSO PLATE 11.

Cocaine (Pimps) looks no more confrontational than a slightly bungled red square, even though a Richard Pryor joke is stenciled in orange over it. In terms of its schematic construction as a painting with a joke printed on top, it appears a response to Richard Prince's paintings of ethnic jokes. But in Prince's paintings, the jokes reign supreme, appearing block-printed and pushed to the edge onto colored backgrounds chosen to affiliate the paintings themselves, however loosely, with the class of tacky commodity in which the ethnic joke itself circulates (e.g., burgundy against avocado green, brown against yellow). Yet unlike Prince's larger, hyperreadable paintings, Ligon's advance not as full constructions but rather in a slow march of layers: first comes the colored light, then the unsteady type, the shock of the content, and the unruly but irrepressible guffaw. Ligon's palette in this series is also garish, but here it disserves rather than aids legibility, pushing a number of the pieces close to the level of sheer optical events. In *Cocaine (Pimps)*, Ligon's oilstick is an intense yellow-orange that registers only faintly in the harsh light of the bright red ground. One has a comparable difficulty accessing the goods that *Mudbone (Liar)* (1993; fig. 4.9) offers up, now in complementary shades of red and orange that virtually absorb one another, an effect that is especially strong where flecks of extra pigment gather within the passage and at its edges.

Pryor took culturally specific comedy beyond the airing of dirty laundry to the point of an open-ended analysis of the stereotypes gathered at the intersection of race and sexuality. Ligon's works using Pryor's jokes generate a keen sense of the challenges Pryor posed audiences when he first became well known for the 1970s routines these works reference. Ligon renders Pryor's jokes roughly and thickly but in such a way that, despite their excessive volume, they do not get very far from the fields they inhabit. The paintings are thus more bright and hazy than they are colorful per se. At once vibrant and vibrating, they seem bound somehow, and agitating, between the canvas and the eye, between seeing


Niggers had the biggest dicks in the world, and they was trying to find a place where they could have they contest. And they wasn't no freak, they didn't want everybody looking. So they walking around looking for a secret place. So they walked across the Caidac Gate Bridge and the nigger seen that water and made him wanna piss. One said, "Man, I got to take a leak." And he pulled his thing out and was pissing. Other nigger pulled his out, took a piss.
One nigger said, "Goddamn, this water cold!"
The other nigger say, "Yeah, and it's deep too!"

4-9 Glenn Ligon, *Mudbone (Liar)*, 1993. Oilstick and acrylic on linen, 32 × 32 in. Collection Raymond J. McGuire, New York. ALSO PLATE 12.

and reading. One's eyes seize them only by frantic ocular adjustment. This visual effect forces us to stand close and let our eyes come to grips with the magnitude of color transfixing us. Then, as Meyer suggests, the pictures are able "to be dissociated from Pryor's voice and linked instead to the viewer's."[60] *Mudbone (Liar)* reads as follows:

> Niggers had the biggest dicks in the world, and they was trying to find a place where they could have they contest. And they wasn't no freak, they didn't want everybody looking. So they walking around looking for a secret place. So they walked across the Golden Gate Bridge and the nigger seen that water and made him wanna piss. One said, "Man, I got to take a leak." And he pulled his thing out and was pissing. Other nigger pulled his out, took a piss.
> One nigger said, "Goddamn, this water cold!"
> The other nigger say, "Yeah, and it's deep too!"

Reading these words, one finds oneself the unwitting agent of an extreme impropriety, as one is conscripted into the promulgation of a stereotype. But things are hardly this serious, as we realize when we come, by speaking it, to possess the text. Through mimicry, Pryor's language forcefully engages a racial stereotype. But the lesson of *Mudbone (Liar)*-as-script is that Pryor's characters did not arrive at any understanding of the world through their "jungle dicks"; rather, their jungle dicks are the means by which the world arrived at its understanding of them. The scale and the color of the painting provide each encounter with it its own atmosphere and insurgent charge, at once privatizing and projecting our discomfort at being brought to this realization publicly. The experience of these works' at once optical and narrative force affirms one of Fanon's most apt observations about the black male sex: "The sexual potency of the Negro is hallucinating. That is indeed the word: This potency *must* be hallucinated."[61] Ligon's construction is also a phenomenologically

augmented illustration of the way "the Negro" is "fixated at the genital"[62] as an effect of looks and readings that fantastically conjure the availability of a body part that is at most times hidden.

These statements, such as they are, struggle and fail to gain enough purchase on their grounds—in every case, a monochrome painting—to stand alone, or become "statements in themselves." Their struggle to achieve density is, I think, an index of the monochrome's role in these works. First and foremost, the monochrome signifies not only painting as idealized into a utopian, primary process, but modernism as "an area of specialization for the production of luxurious perceptual fetishes for privileged audiences."[63] Yet even indictments of the late modernist project such as this are surprisingly indifferent to the privilege they themselves flaunt in suggesting that there exists a type of monochrome that might purge "chromatic qualities of their mystical and transcendental meaning."[64] Ligon's paintings refuse this thesis with an action that subjects the monochrome to a form of addition that critically supplements its meaning. If *Cocaine (Pimps)* takes the monochrome as a problem and transcribes a Richard Pryor joke onto it as a means of problematization, it is not to deface the monochrome but to transform it into an even more powerful sort of institutional critique. Their severe opticity and intimate scale guarantee the privatization of these images, assure that they will evoke a gamut of specific, wholly imagined bodily schemas—the stereotyped "niggers" and "faggots" filling Pryor's mordant black spectacle—that also hold us in their thrall, and whose "appearance" requires a certain blurring of one's vision. The insurgent vitality of Ligon's monochrome functions to invoke the operation of "color" in a register—race—that remains stuck between the perceptual and the conceptual with precious little to tell us about "actual, visible nature."[65] These works conscript the monochrome as a kind of Trojan horse, as a way to insinuate Pryor's own institutional critique (its subject, black masculinity) in

the gallery or museum setting in which most viewers will encounter them. In this way Ligon puts both materials to the work of revising two of the most durable ideologies under which he himself labors.

Revision, in this instance, does not imply a refinement that assimilates what it refines to a well-sanctioned, contentedly territorial whole. Rather, these paintings are flagrantly unstable. Their visibly anxious disposition as pictures prefigures the critical slippage they introduce into the conjoined discursive operations of modernist painting and black representation. Its importance as a revision strategy comes in combining resistance on a broad cultural terrain with a more specific resistance of forces specifically at work in particular image-making context. Here again, the relevant action is the interpenetration of typically distinct domains. Specifically, though, they introduce strong situating elements into a previously unified field: content into the monochrome; unseemliness into the gallery; performing into beholding; even pain into comedy. They do the same for the at times uninhabitably homogenizing field of black masculinity, which Ligon's paintings, in acknowledging a desiring complicity with the fantasticalization of the black man's sex, reorients around difference. Indeed, while the optics of struggle illuminates the equally repressive and arousing effects of the stereotype, its more powerful gesture is to scrutinize the everyday politics of black masculinity in a way that makes a pageant of its ordinarily cryptic inner relationships. One doesn't need to push Pryor's vignettes far to expose their homoerotic component. Pryor's comedy is very much existential, and in his sketches Pryor himself "paints pictures" of loving confraternities of black men in bonding situations, glazed over with the kind of humor that is also a survival tactic. Ligon's excerpts of these gatherings, especially in *Mudbone (Liar)*, magnify these confraternities to reveal "a love that alters perception and complicates judgment, especially in a relation to masculinity and relations between men."[56] It becomes clear that

Pryor's sketches desire in the way that Ligon's work desires: to be seen as focused meditations on surface, which because issuing from the standpoint of substance, entail a blurring of the line that separates the two. To blur the line that separates homosocial relations absolutely from homoerotic ones is already to have accepted the challenge of forgoing surface. As Jonathan Dollimore reminds us:

> From within such a utopian perspective sexuality comes to be understood relationally—not as the internal relations of sexual difference, but the relations between the sexual and the nonsexual, as these both have been imagined and as they may now be radically envisioned. This would be related to a progressive sexual politics wherein the aim is . . . to eroticize the social while at the same time releasing it from the grip of sexuality as conventionally conceived.[67]

In a 2004 project that saw Ligon return to the joke paintings, his gaze upon Pryor seems more fixed than previously. While these works openly admire Pryor's pioneering venture into the interfolded depths of the black unspoken, some appear to do so with an eyebrow raised:

> Never fuck a faggot. I'd like to say this out here to all American male persons, Never Fuck a Faggot cause they will lie. They always say, "I won't tell." They lie! They can't wait till you finish fuckin' em.
> "Well guess who was here?
> GGGGGGGGiiiiiiiirrrrrrrrlllllll,
> Looka here. Weeeellll, the nigga got more bitch in him than me."

Ligon has said that the painting in which these lines occur, *More Bitch Than Me #1* (fig. 4.10), provides a way of looking at the possibility of "a gay man inhabiting Pryor." As I understand it, this is not an attempt to

Never fuck a faggot. I'd like to say this
out here to all American male persons,
Never Fuck a Faggot cause they will lie.
They always say, "I won't tell." They lie!
They can't wait till you finish fuckin'em
"Well guess who was here?
GGGGGGGGiiiiiiiiirrrrrrrriiiiiiii
looka here. Weeeeliii, the nigga got
more bitch in him than me."

4.10 Glenn Ligon, *More Bitch Than Me #1*, 2004. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 32 × 32 in. ALSO PLATE 13.

out Pryor so much as a differently articulated maneuver in an overall strategy to skew our orientation to cultural givens. Such an enterprise might be valued simply for calling out of the fixed image just those possibilities that one is most unlikely to imagine it holds. The value of Ligon's project with the text paintings is more specific still. For in respect to the inextricably linked art history and cultural politics at work in his situation, it follows the path of the perverse. What emerges from these domains contradicts what once defined them: "a deviation from, which is also, simultaneously, a contradiction of."[68]

5
The Aesthetics of Dispossession
William Pope.L's Performance Interventions

[W]e may need another language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well.
Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

I had been having trouble finding a way into this chapter when, going home one night, I was reminded that my university campus is traversed daily and nightly by homeless persons. In being so reminded, I came to see William Pope.L's project a bit more clearly than before. Ordinarily the homeless are not among those whose movements we imagine to define the space itself: a clot of collegiate Gothic and international modern buildings that marks the university as an institutional form within an enclosed, mixed-use neighborhood. The homeless are undeniably in this space, but it may seem that they are not in it fully. Yet their purposeful movement through it, I realized, *is* a form of participation in the campus's continual construction as a prelegitimated and actively

legitimating cultural space. To the extent that the space's meaning is linked to its use by staff, faculty, and students, so is the presumed transience of this space's homeless population one of its defining features. Part of what makes this the kind of place it is can be explained by reference to the special placelessness that characterizes Chicago's homeless in relation to it. More than a simple reminder of what lies beyond campus, then, this population literally draws the *x*-axis needed to stabilize the *y* constituting all that one is given to notice or dwell upon in this particular environment.

Of course, it is my own fault that I needed William Pope.L to point this out to me, but I open with this realization because it suggests the sort of singular insight his work can offer into the ways *what we are not given to notice* in the social can, upon its emergence, alter our view of what we are. This chapter aims to examine some of Pope.L's attempts to enliven the conflicts and contradictions embedded in those seemingly ordinary relations between persons, spaces, and objects that yield up our categories and forms of cultural knowledge. His works fall into several distinct classes. Since the late 1970s, in addition to the street performance interventions I will discuss here, Pope.L has created theatrical performances (some performed in galleries), installations, discrete objects, and drawings by the thousands. All contribute to a practice he regards holistically, its radically dissimilar components each providing opportunities for Pope.L to erase boundaries between aesthetic space and that of conflictual social relations.[1] His less explicitly interventionary work often sees him use commonplace materials to inject examples or symbols of live social process into the spaces of actual works of art, thereby making the instability of both perceivable.

This often involves recourse to the manifestation of chemical, biological, and physical transformations within the exhibition space, or

even the structure of a single object. The messy disposition of Pope.L's works might seem to belie the conceptual ambition of his practice, which includes such works as *Map of the World* (1999–2000; fig. 5.1), a reversed billboard-sized map of the United States constructed from hot dogs, splashed with condiments as if to mimic demographic notation, that Pope.L nailed to a propped slab of plywood. The work was then left to rot and regather as a pile of decomposed filth on the gallery floor—an unplanned but expected action that in a way addresses the gravity of the contemporary global politics. Pope.L's materials are the undeodorized stuffs of everyday life; often there is even a discomfiting odor to contend with (as was the case with *Map of the World*). Always familiar and often fugitive, they range from unstable foodstuffs (mayonnaise, milk, Italian sausage, peanut butter, ketchup) to recyclables (plastic, plywood, newspaper) to the streets in the town where we live. That such materials and sensations exist in plenty and tend to come cheap are themselves among the givens subjected to Pope.L's analyses of the material conditions of meaning production. These analyses are focused by an interest in the body as the repository of such meanings, and in fact Pope.L's commitment to returning his work to the world is best exemplified by his "crawls" and other street performance interventions. These works, more than others, suggest some of Pope.L's acknowledged influences, including those of Duchamp, Beuys, Vito Acconci, Allan Kaprow, Adrian Piper, and Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, Pope.L's advisor in graduate school.[2] They distinguish themselves in their effort to analyze, by focusing on, the function and play of signs within the social context of creative acts. In this view of performance, the work is not a "signifying textual system" but a vaster phenomenon inscribed in its surround. In this way, it is also capable of reinscribing that surround by entering a dynamic relationship with its audience.

5.1 William Pope.L, *Map of the World*, 1999–2000. Frankfurters, nails, wood, paint, toys, condiments, charcoal, and white glue on plywood; dimensions variable (approx. 12 × 4 ft.). Installation view, Diverse Works, Houston, Texas. Photo: Arturo Sanchez. Courtesy the artist.

The fruits of Pope.L's practice occupy the space between objects and actions, making and performance without wearing any of these designations comfortably.[3] Pope.L's philosophy (as articulated in the writings and interviews that form a literary complement to his visual practice) stresses the productive potential of apositionality. Pope.L has given various names to the principle from which he works, but "lack worth having" and "have-not-ness" distill it particularly well—the former being a way he describes blackness, and the latter his term for the destitute condition of many of the city-dwelling family members with whom Pope.L maintains close but sporadic contact from his base in Maine, where he now teaches—since his actions are really meditations on impermanence, indeed on dispossession, as a kind of general condition. Pope.L's actions are especially challenging for having these qualities themselves, for being marked almost uniformly by a poignant unknowability. Because I regard it as important not to shy from this factor, I will focus here on how Pope.L's symbolic actions intensify our perception of social conflict by locating it *within, not simply between,* phenomena that we might ordinarily categorize as discrete.[4] Although many commentators have called this art "uncategorizable," few have noticed that its central problem *is* categories, or, more precisely, our experience and use of them in the context of determinant social relations. Using all of the elements that make up a performance (the text or plan, actor, space, spectator, and the social circumstances), these works seek to collapse the contextual into the formal, thereby invalidating their separation in order to make what Pope.L calls "fresh culture" out of the social practice of sign-making.

Pope.L values this apositionality as an artistic strategy because it creates a sliding that implicates at once the sliding element (say, a given object or action) and the various domains, such as the sites of work

and viewer, whose static character its motility calls into question. As I attempted to illustrate with the figure of the transient who, by "just passing through," defines a critical component of the campus environment, this slide may or may not be the "constant" in Pope.L's practice to date, but in any case it is figured often and complexly enough to underscore the intricacy and optimism of that practice. It is as if its target were precisely the impotence of the contemporary critical modality known as *raceclassgender,* because Pope.L's work foregrounds the disorienting, disintegrating effects upon spectator and spectacle alike of representations of identity that do not clean up or average their contraries, but rather linger in the dissolution that constitutes and ultimately connects them. Although the play of differences reigns supreme in his work, it's never simply as a matter of one difference against the other, but more like a meditation on the impermanence that inheres in each: the play *in* differences.

Somewhere in Manhattan, there is a black man in a Superman costume crawling north along Broadway. His task is as difficult to watch as it is impossible to ignore, as he moves at less than a crawl, advancing only in ten-inch bursts, again and again. One misses something if unaffected by the wincing, unromantic sobriety and entirely unprepossessed seriousness of this deed; it is expressed in the man's visible torment, his whimpers, and the fact that everything about his costume—which includes heavy-duty work boots and gloves in addition to the heavily padded suit, backed with a skateboard bearing the trademark *S*—suggests that he will remain prostrated, come what may. In keeping with contemporary urban custom, those surrounding him continue on their way, perhaps casting a bewildered glance but seldom breaking pace. But the crawler

shows an indifference of his own: stop and ask him what he is doing, and he might reply "Working" without pause. Somehow the presence of an assiduous videographer substantiates this claim.

Probably you will not have an opportunity to interrupt the course of this crawl, which is titled *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street* (fig. 5.2). The work is an endurance piece that Pope.L began in December 2001 on Liberty Island, at the base of the Statue of Liberty, and will execute a few blocks at a time before terminating in the Bronx.[5] Crawling has been a cornerstone of Pope.L's practice since the beginning, a persistent feature of his effort to destabilize political space. Like much else that Pope.L has produced since 1978, the crawls are impermanent, durational works known mostly through videos, photographs, or reputation. But *Great White Way* shares an important feature with several of Pope.L's crawls: site specificity. Like *Times Square Crawl*, Pope.L's first crawl, enacted in 1978 (fig. 5.3), and *Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991; discussed below), *Great White Way* symbolically appropriates a public space well known as a historic and tourist site and as a gathering place and revenue center for members of the city's homeless population. What is more, since the 1970s, each of these sites has been the target of civic initiatives aimed at banishing "unproductive" forms of use in the name of reclamation and revitalization.[6] Pope.L's crawls form part of a counterpractice of civil disobedience that takes aim at the view, so often mobilized in the name of revitalization, that "deviant" uses of public space impede the flow of life as it is meant to be lived. With the childlike posture he assumes to perform his crawls, Pope.L through them declares, public space itself begot this as its unacknowledged remainder. By performing them while wearing business suits and other accoutrements of upright citizenship, prosperity, and cultural superheroism—all signs of unconflicted identity performance that neatly align race, class, and sex—Pope.L reveals that the regulatory narratives of common space,

5.2 William Pope.L, *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, 2001–ongoing. Performance, New York. View: Broadway at Reade Street. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Pruznick/Grey. ALSO PLATE 14.

5.3 William Pope.L, *Times Square Crawl*, 1978 (part of *Meditation Square Pieces*). Performance, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ellen LaForge. ALSO PLATE 15.

only visible when interdicted, are essentially *representational* practices. Furthermore, they are representational practices enacted in sites where the right to inhabit common space is not only constantly at stake but entirely an issue of power and identity. And just as such practices can cancel out manifestations of difference with astonishing efficiency, *they can also be opposed* through counterpractical labors to produce signs that will work at odds with the very systems of knowledge that would settle the matter of dwelling for them. For meanings *are* dwellings, their confines being as real and consequential as any edifice's, and as differently inhabitable as there are subjects to occupy them.

Conventional representations of urban destitution, whether literary or visual, official or unofficial, teem with alienation effects of the sort that Pope.L's counterpractice resists.[7] As I tried to suggest at the outset, because this alienation is so strong, it is easy to experience the homeless less as subjects like us and more as embodied images, say, of "street life" at its harshest and most depleting or of "hard luck" made manifest. They function like vessels, somehow signaling but no longer containing a vitality that has been evacuated. However, the lack that appears to constitute them results in part from a determined prevarication of their substance by a cultural economy and social practices that place them literally beyond account—distancing them as examples of a condition rather than structurally integral components of ours. Pope.L's upbringing in a family deeply impacted by homelessness, alcoholism, and drug addiction has informed his art from the start. While Pope.L is gainfully employed as an artist and a professor of theater and rhetoric, some members of his family remain homeless. The rift separating the material conditions of his own life from theirs, Pope.L has suggested, makes it impossible for him to imagine a vulcanized self-image that papers over that difference.[8] This structuring antagonism serves his work not merely as a generative material but as a conceptual frame: much of his output,

Holland Cotter writes, "is about creating something substantial but complex and unpin-downable—a life, a viable ego, an art—out of having nothing or very little."[9] Pope.L's work has served him as a way to articulate this condition from the side of the prevaricated subject while being located squarely within an art situation, which enables the work both because it signifies resymbolization as a practical form of engagement with the world and because art's "world" is so often understood to constitute a realm apart. Generalizing about this condition, Pope.L has extended the idea of "lack worth having" to describe his black maleness as well. Indeed, throughout his work signs of race and gender function in culture: as concepts with unimpeachably real effects but whose manifestations are shockingly inconsistent, presenting them as the effects of heterogeny rather than according to the logic of their imperative forms such as black art has long sought to condense by demonstrating or bearing witness to certain cultural truths. (It could be shown that the discourse of African-American art history has systematically assigned and ordered these functions, demonstration and testimony, according to a reproductive logic of complementary, male/female gender difference.)

When he started doing the crawls in the late 1970s, Pope.L wanted to commit symbolic actions that could generate images of a contradiction that he knows intimately: between the image of the homeless person as evacuated of subjectivity and "the history of skills and knowledge," his restorative term for what such an image can obscure.[10] Taken together, these attributes form an image of the homeless subject around the competing images that converge in the production of any social idea. A similar structuring tension applies to Pope.L's explanation of his crawling practice in particular. Basically, he was concerned not to allow his own upward mobility to diminish his deep connections to what it means "to give up [your] verticality":

> People who are forced to give up their verticality are prey to all kinds of dangers. But, let us imagine a person who has a job, possesses the means to remain vertical, but chooses momentarily to give up that verticality? To undergo that threat to his/her bodily/spiritual categories—that person would learn something. I did. . . . Now I crawl to remember.[11]

The power of the crawl, or the key to its criticality, derives partly from the potential that a grown man in a suit projects but which Pope.L thwarts by remaining pressed against the ground. The act of evidencing unrealized potential necessarily throws light on the deterring forces themselves. Pope.L never makes literal reference to them, but rather evokes them through changes in costume and context.

Great White Way takes its name from the section of Broadway between Forty-second and Fifty-third streets that forms the hub of American theatrical culture. Since Broadway is the only street in Manhattan that covers the island's entire length, the theater district is only a fraction of the trip Pope.L has planned.[12] By collapsing a work that aims to "cover Manhattan" into one of its many charged symbolic sites, the title *Great White Way* converts Pope.L's apparently value-free movement through that space into a specifically performative mobilization against some aspect of it.[13] Pope.L's crawl stimulates critical consciousness of, among other things, a division endemic to "common sense" but at odds with communal life. This division separates out and institutionalizes the "theatrical" aspect of an existence that is in fact founded in, even perhaps only understandable by recourse to, the "performances of self" that we give and that we command from others. *Great White Way*'s emphasis on frustrated self-performance gains a particular significance when considered in light of its timing. Pope.L conceived it in 2001 when, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, most public pronounce-

ments on the subject were underwritten by triumphalist American rhetorics of democracy and freedom. This effort included a broad campaign to stylize Manhattan and brand it anew as a monument to American resiliency and a coercive image of consensus. *Great White Way*'s image of incapacitated, prostrated superheroics clashed violently with the rhetoric of national ascendancy that contracted the image of a wounded yet invincible Manhattan to do its bidding. It also underscored the new set of challenges that this latest phase of urban rejuvenation presents New York's economically deprived population. Not only will this large and diverse group, mostly comprising women, the sick, and racial minorities, experience dispossession, but it will be dispossessed by and through a set of maneuvers that is, as Rosalyn Deutsche first argued in 1988, a structural, not incidental, feature of the city's growth scheme.[14]

Pope.L's aggrieved movement away, along a horizontal axis, from the dignified verticality of the Statue of Liberty rearticulates Manhattan as a set of material conditions whose particularities are at present threatened in at least two important ways (fig. 5.4). First, by an increase in "the residential facets of poverty—disinvestment, eviction, displacement, and homelessness" that are consequent upon the kind of aggressive redevelopment that characterizes recovering markets. And second, by the more general abstraction of political specificity that is encouraged by the new function of the city itself as national monument. On the occasion of the Statue's centennial in 1986, the monument's relationship to the city was summarized by *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger in this way: "[Manhattan's] intense activity becomes background, and the statue . . . becomes foreground: we cannot ask of a monument that it do anything more."[15] *Great White Way* reactivates the very context that Goldberger sees the Statue of Liberty rendering static, locating that intense activity in a coarse topography of struggles between

5.4 William Pope.L, *The Great White Way*, 2001–ongoing. Performance, New York. View: Statue of Liberty, base. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Pruznick/Grey.

institutions and practices, and thereby restoring the Statue to its function as a grasping political allegory. *Great White Way* seeks to demark a quintessentially American space in which Pope.L's racial blackness crosses Superman's hypermasculinism only to reveal another stratum of representation in which both will struggle for visibility ("standing") in the light of the Statue's race-blind, apolitical femininity. *Great White Way* restages as a broken promise the widely beloved claim ascribed to "Lady Liberty" in Emma Lazarus's famous poeticization of the American democratic project, where the Statue lifts her "lamp beside the golden door" for the "homeless [and] tempest-tost." *Great White Way* understands the Statue's uprightness as a posture both dramatically at odds with the political present and, paradoxically, linked to Pope.L's symbolization of the United States as a broken and therefore representative social body. By staging a sacrifice of identities that "brings down" two equally fantastic ciphers of superaggregated subjectivity—the Statue's and Superman's—*Great White Way* recognizes that finding representation in a moment of crisis can require us to abandon rather than shore up the very positions that make us feel secure. The result is a synthetic image of identity whose structure cannot be determined by a mapping of its surface, but only by reference to the material circumstances brought to bear on it by its differences, in whose interaction its meaning is generated.

Great White Way expresses a consistent aspect of Pope.L's performances, namely in requiring us to dwell on an unfocusable set of phenomena: the *surpluses* of materialized identity effects where subjects and their categories lose their definition and gain unresolvably multiple meanings. His own black male body has long served Pope.L as a kind of baseline material that he submits to division by means of contradiction. Combining symbolic action, provocative accessorizing, and a large

helping of surrender, his practice produces images that overwhelm with signification, by their examples spatializing accounts of the body limited to its conventional cultural form as a proof of identity. Pope.L's account of identity reflects a commitment to the lateral relation encouraged by a conception of democracy that "consists of the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics along with the necessity of their articulation."[16] In deference to this radically differential society ideal, Pope.L's practice finds value only in its uptake and determination by others. Such "surrender" appears to be one of the terms of its resistance to cultural systems that would predetermine its value as a matter of course, and even militate against unsolicited practices of revaluation. In the contemporary United States, the scope of permissible actions in the black public sphere is frequently adjudicated by self-appointed legislators who target images that contravene, or who endorse the heedless reproduction of, the masculinist standard upheld in conservative narratives of black sociocultural progress. Indeed, the emphasis in Pope.L's crawls on horizontality is important to understand in terms of the compelling contradictions it addresses in this context.

Recalling Fanon's description of the formation of the black body as a "slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of the spatial and temporal world," Paul Gilroy has referred to popular, contemporary variants on a long-standing tendency in black political discourse to advance the male body as the very instrument of racial advancement. Describing them, Gilroy observes:

> Their power derives from a situation in which the black body has become the means by which individual freedom and racial solidarity can be bound to life itself.... Today, the leaping native is particularly visible in the corporate versions of multi-culture.... [T]he

> native's exceptional prowess lends magical qualities to the sale of commodities like sports shoes and clothing which promote complex forms of intimacy and mimicry across the line of color. A picture of Michael Jordan . . . can be captioned "You'll believe you can fly" without anybody raising an eyebrow.[17]

Later in the article in which this insight occurs, Gilroy identifies in the unfortunately infamous lyrics of some ghetto-based rap artists a resistant representational practice whose use of the body, in his words, "reorders the hierarchy of body zones and organs."[18] As an example, Gilroy proposes some rappers' adoption of "dog" and "bitch" as terms for "man" and "woman." He discerns in this a move that contravenes the rhetoric of verticality, as it "lowers the black body's center of gravity, taking it closer to the low-down and dirty."[19] Setting the music's worrisome sexual politics to the side for a moment, as Gilroy also does, there remains something restrictive about an alternative economy grounded in an instinct-based spatialization of the black body. What's more, Gilroy depicts here only those who can (literally) afford to have their bodies reordered and their centers of gravity lowered as a matter of elective corporeal sovereignty—we're talking about millionaire recording artists and the mass of consumers stylized after them. The realities of those *forced* to live their lives on or near the ground are omitted from this scene of subversion. If such persons' lives remain human body-centric, this is surely because the risk of physical danger—by any of the scores of mistreatments ranging from burning and beating to decapitation (according to a report issued annually by the National Coalition for the Homeless) that often appear customized for the purpose of dehumanizing homeless persons—is omnipresent, even in the safest spaces available to them on the street.[20]

The invisibility of the economically destitute in rhetorics of cultural ascendancy became blindingly apparent with the unplanned involvement of a spectator in the *Tompkins Square Crawl* that Pope.L executed in July 1991. Just over a half-block into the crawl, a black resident of New York's East Village noticed and mistook Pope.L's white cameraman for the engineer of the scenario. Upon learning that he was not, the resident's compassion turned to contempt and the performance itself intensified into a spectacular image of the way black political space is traversed by asymmetrical relations of class and sexuality. The encounter brought to light the kinds of difference that often have to be nullified in order to ready black politics for public consumption. Shaping the context of this crawl, civic discourse about the homeless had been concentrated around Tompkins Square Park for several months prior. The public park, located in Manhattan's East Village, is a ten-and-a-half-acre parcel surrounded on all four sides by apartments, some of whose prices had reached a half-million dollars by 1988. Beginning in the spring of that year, in response to complaints from neighborhood residents about nightlife in the park, police had begun enforcing a typically disregarded curfew. The ensuing conflict reached a climax on August 7 when the deployment of 350 city police officers to quell a demonstration by defenders of the park's culture led to an all-night riot.[21] Within days of the riot, what began as a neighbor-to-neighbor dispute poorly handled by the police escalated into a citywide campaign to delegitimate the rights of the homeless to settle in sites such as Tompkins Square.

In the riot's aftermath, the *New York Times* reported: "The benches are lined with blankets, shopping bags, clothing—the worldly goods of people for whom this park is the only home they've got. Dozing, chatting, drinking, they turn public space into private space, the passer-by into a voyeur."[22] This widely promulgated view decidedly reduces social

conflict to a neat, theoretically defensible public/private distinction—hastened by the vanishing of the skinheads who were intercessors between the neighbors and park residents, and the perversion of the park's value-free utility by those who would demoralize leisure itself by "privatizing" the space. This same outlook informed the *Times*'s May 1991 report that the "clash of competing social interests [in the park] has paralyzed local authorities."[23] This paralysis was relieved within days when, following another riot, Mayor David Dinkins implemented a policy of forcible eviction in order to close the park, along with several other open gathering places in the city.[24] The move made a matter of city policy the restitution of the space the homeless had somehow rendered "private" to its rightful owner: the idealized and contingency-free "public" imagined wholly to comprise the city and its interests.[25] Following the park's closure for a fourteen-month "reconstruction" and its reopening in August 1992, parks commissioner Betsy Gotbaum, reflecting on the controversy, said, "I could not see the connection between the housing shortage and the abuse of the park."[26] Once the homeless had been vanquished, the park was effectively reborn in disconnection from the problem of the housing shortage, or at least as much disconnection as can be suggested by a full-time police presence and apocryphal stories about the Parks Department deploying bulldozers on overnight "cleanup" missions. Eventually, this sanitized image of the park would overtake more quotidian accounts as well: "For people with kids," the *Times* reported one East Village resident confessing, "it's a dream come true. I was against what they were doing, but I am really enjoying the effects of it."[27]

This context allows us to appreciate better the full implications of Pope.L's *Tompkins Square Crawl*. Pope.L described the crawl simply as "[a] street performance intervention in which I staged a crawl at a loca-

tion which had just been the site of police violence against the homeless. Dressed in a wool suit and holding a small potted flower, in temperatures measuring 98 degrees and upwards, I attempted to crawl as far as I could until I could go no further."[28] In the video that documents the performance, several minutes pass before anything more extraordinary than the crawl itself occurs. Pope.L is seen from above and in front, close to street level, as he struggles to hold aloft a potted yellow marigold while advancing along the road a few inches at a time (fig. 5.5). Periodically the frame widens to include the many indifferent passersby, including several of the many officers assigned to park detail. If they notice Pope.L at all, they do not break gait. Passersby are integral to crawls as markers of normalcy, since they cannot even be slowed by the powerful curiosity induced by a nattily dressed, flower-bearing black crawler inching down the middle of the street. Pope.L remains unfazed, save when he curses himself when a flower stem breaks as he rotates onto his back to push with his feet for a while.

Pope.L had traveled only two-thirds of a block when the older, black male resident of the East Village, after sizing up the white cameraman's relationship to Pope.L, sprang into action. Entering the frame, he bends over Pope.L to express concern: "You all right, brother?" Tersely, Pope.L indicates that he is and the man returns to the curb. Then an edit freezes the video, stilling the simple but telling image in which the concerned neighbor has seized another black onlooker by the shoulders to point him toward Pope.L with a disapproving finger (fig. 5.6). When the video resumes, the two confidently approach Pope.L's collaborator. The concerned man demands to know, "What are you doing showing black people like this?" "We're working together," answers the videographer. The resident repeats himself several times, warning Pope.L that he is "going to get knocked off the street" and his camera broken. Pope.L

5.5 William Pope.L, *Tompkins Square Crawl*, 1991. Performance, New York. View: street. Courtesy the artist. Photo: James Pruznick.
ALSO PLATE 16.

5.6 William Pope.L, *Tompkins Squatre Crawl*, 1991. View: two men on sidewalk. Courtesy the artist. Photo: James Pruznick.

replies, "It's an art project"; "We're working... we'll explain it later." These only make the resident more indignant. The video continues as the dialogue escalates:

POPE.L Listen, you guys give me another half an hour and I'll sit down and talk with you over a Coke, but right now—

RESIDENT Explain what? You running down the street like this in a goddamn suit? I wear a suit like that to work!

POPE.L Listen, I'm *doing* work. I'll explain it to you later.

RESIDENT No, bitch, you're going to explain it to *me* now.

POPE.L No, I'm not going to explain it to you now; I'm going to do my work.

RESIDENT No? All right, then we're going to break the camera.

At this point the resident's companion reenters, in an effort to extract a clarification that will satisfy his friend. Out of some indistinct dialogue, Pope.L can be heard saying, "I create symbolic acts."

RESIDENT WHAT IS A SYMBOLIC ACT?... Crawling up to the white man, or what?! By the way, the only thing I've seen like this is, uh... what's his name's *The Invisible Man.*

POPE.L There you go. Now we're talking. Now when I get finished we'll go and have a Coke—

RESIDENT Uh-uh. No. We're not going to have no fuckin' Coke because you ain't going to finish. Not around this neighborhood, not with what's going on in this neighborhood.

With that, the resident disappears momentarily before returning with a policeman in tow, who, failing to comprehend the reason for his involvement, is told by the resident that Pope.L has no permit. The officer

replies, "He doesn't need a permit." "Yes, he does," the resident insists. "He needs a permit to make a movie in New York." The footage closes with Pope.L rising and exiting the frame as the officer turns again to the flummoxed East Villager: "All he's doing is making a video."

While the resident's claims are superficially contradictory—he is "for" Pope.L at one moment and "against" him at another—they agree on one thing: images of black people "like this" have no place in the public sphere he surveys as a writer and a citizen, and he underscores this conviction by threatening more than once to destroy the video camera itself and, at one point, warning Pope.L that he's "going to get knocked off the street." The resident's objections shift, occupying two distinct modalities within a matter of seconds, while the ostensible grounds of his objection ("what's going on in this neighborhood") remain the same. In the first instance, when he perceived a white-on-black injustice, the resident sought compassionately to receive Pope.L within a maximally expansive blackness that drew him across class lines. But in the second, once he grasped Pope.L's purpose, he retreated, revealing just how complex and unstable such affiliations can be. What provided coherence to the resident's position—which, given his various appeals to aesthetic, civic, and ultimately legal authority, basically deems the idea of an aestheticized portrayal of destitution in itself deplorable—were precisely the implications of Pope.L's performance for the resident's *own sense of social and political integrity* within the circuit of class and race relations. Just as his appeal to the self-evident value of the business suit had everything to do with that garment's place in the resident's own self-styling repertoire, the invocation of a privileged knowledge of what was *really* going on around the park provided a means to limit that activity's symbolic proximity *to him*, not its manifest connection to Pope.L or his project, which, we presume, was unknown to the resident. In another telling contradiction, the resident's final appeal, to the

symbolically white law, ironically bookends a scenario that only occurred because of the resident's presumption that Pope.L needed his protection against just this sort of authority. The resident's own incisive view into the meaning of Pope.L's action—which view reenacts the objectification of homelessness as a visible but not structurally addressable condition of urban life—aimed to nullify its efficacy as symbolism and thrust it under the sign of abuse.

But abuse of whom? The resident sought to deny Pope.L, whom he presumed to be a fellow member of the vertical class, the right to reoccupy the horizontal register associated with disenfranchisement in general and homelessness in particular. In doing so, he seemed to affirm the transcendence of horizontality as a determining priority for persons of his type. With his protestations, the resident effectively turned Pope.L's resymbolization to his own purposes, first by restoring the figural homeless subject to its place within an inviolable class structure far from the resident's own, and second by seeking to compel Pope.L's recognition of a kind of tacit agreement among middle-class blacks regarding standards of public behavior. The homeless and the destruction of the suit alike, then, seem here to represent the kind of expenditure from which the modern middle class must keep a distance in order to preserve itself. As the resident's reversal of sympathy forcefully indicates, it does so by refusing the obligation of wealth. Some implications of the complex cultural mechanics at work here can be illuminated by Georges Bataille's famous pronouncement about the modern middle class:

> having received with wealth the obligation of functional expenditure[,] the modern bourgeoisie is characterized by the refusal in principle of this obligation. It has distinguished itself from the aristocracy through the fact that it has consented only to spend for itself, and within itself—in other words, by hiding its expenditures

> as much as possible from the eyes of the other classes. . . . The hatred of expenditure is the raison d'être of and the justification for the bourgeoisie [who believe that] because of their habits of accumulation, they were capable of acceptably dominating the poorer classes.[29]

If Pope.L's action breached an implicit black middle-class unity in upward striving, it also exposed that unity as a form of social control—one, moreover, that is avowedly masculinist (whether exercised by men or not). This we can hear in the companion's remark, "*We* ain't crawling, man. *I'm* walking, dude," which exacts compulsory ascendancy within a set of restrictions still narrower than those established by class. By threatening the emasculation/feminization of the nonascendant, it simultaneously invokes and reinstates the familiar figure of the representative autonomous, unambiguously straight, middle-class black man as a kind of built-in stabilizer for the black body politic writ large.

The altercation is shot through with such compensations, which reveal more than anything the instabilities of social knowledge pointed up by disarming identity performances like Pope.L's. In this way it illustrates how the certain knowledge of difference, when it is deployed, can deny variance and substance by simply absorbing them. The resident, when he momentarily abandons the primacy of racial identification in order to confront the involutions of class, sexual, and even generational difference through black representational space, illuminates how frail even the most rehearsed, unselfconscious identity performances become in our actual encounters with others—and perhaps especially when the bond of sameness is breached, surprised by differences that rise to and break its surface calm. As his dishevelment mounts, he gropes ever more intently after forms of knowledge that will hold—of race, class allegiance, legitimate art, and the law—but none quite does. The

kind of knowledge the resident seeks is precisely that which Pope.L's performance aimed at hindering, by offering spectators an invitation to see homelessness differently—for instance, as involving (as it does in countless actual cases) an unannounced and sudden descent from the very sort of security enjoyed by the bona fide "East Village resident." The residents' responses indicate as clearly as could any formal analysis that for them, in so sliding, Pope.L ceased to be the "kind" of black subject, middle-class individual, and man that he appeared to be, or, more precisely, that they needed him to be in order to maintain confidence in those categories. In the frustration, and more disappointingly the reversal of sympathy this caused, we see not only how priorities dictated by identity can cauterize profounder types of relation, but that *a violence* most assuredly inheres in this practice. Pope.L's resymbolization constituted an alternative form of evidencing identity at the level of the subject; a different way of composing oneself for presentation in a context arranged against the cultivation of alternatives to established knowledge. In this way, the performance illustrates well Bataille's overlooked observation about the labor-intensiveness of identity production in the social: "What is commonly called *knowing*—when a man *knows* his neighbor—is never anything but existence composed for an instant (in the sense that all existence composes itself . . .), which *once* made of these two beings a whole every bit as real as its parts."[30]

Without intending to, Pope.L's *crawl* exposed black representational space as fundamentally a compositional politics, one that takes practical action to link subjects in the service of ideals and against proliferations of difference within itself or those whom it deputizes. *Tompkins Square Crawl* also suggests that this politics, like any, is most visible when at work on itself, compulsively enacting the cancellation of the conflicts that, in fact, provide it with definition. Pope.L's crawls offer to the housed an invitation to suspend the social-institutional reproduc-

tion of the homeless as the dormant images of a lamentable condition, and to imagine a different, indeed integral kind of relationship with them—for we are all productive units in the same general economy. The resident vigorously refused to have the parameters of that relationship disturbed. When he privileges the figure of the homeless, this helps him to clarify parameters which Pope.L's action exceeded; it helps him draw a line between himself and his "walking" friend, on one side, from the homeless, on the other. The homeless would seem to figure the *excess* skimmed off in his social-averaging scheme. In this way, the resident's action also expresses a deep wish not to be deprived of an unfailingly clear vision by means of which he secures reliable dwelling for himself amidst the vicissitudes of identity pervading the social. Yet as Pope.L's action obstinately demands, and Deutsche astutely reminds us, "[p]recisely because we want to understand and change current representations of, and attitudes toward, homeless people, we must—to use Adorno's words—'turn towards the subject.' . . . [T]he dismissal of questions of subjectivity often leads critics to invoke 'the homeless person' less to promote social justice than to prove the sharper penetration of their own social vision."[31] The remarkable interaction next to Tompkins Square involved a turn toward the subject upon which the resident did not see what he wanted to see. In this way, *Tompkins Square Crawl* not only crossed a line understood by some as a self-preservative and therefore necessary limitation, but materialized a stark image of the social price paid not only for middle-class comfort, which Pope.L subtly but emphatically represented as the imminent possibility of its loss, but for security within any identity (category) established on the basis of an exclusion. The parkside encounter showed this cost to involve the abandonment of the type of compassion for the homeless that initially thrust the resident across the street, as well as the violent seizure of an artist's (anyone's?) right to revaluate the very symbols by which we identify the

need for such compassion. Both decline the *questions* of subjectivity that are opened up in a turn toward the subject. By inadvertently drawing out several of the miscognitions arising when answers take the place of such questions, Pope.L's crawl went beyond demanding that homeless people be recognized for their personhood. Rather, the event reconfigured subjectivity as the effect of a horizontal, constitutive process—in which identity is but a gathering point in an ongoing co-production of signs for exchange in a symbolic social economy.

In this, we begin fully to appreciate that the place of homelessness in Pope.L's art is not determined simply by his familiarity with it. More than that, Pope.L's exploded view of homelessness supplies powerful if difficult means for coming to terms with a quality of dispossession that characterizes the experience of identity more generally. Indeed the operations of dispossession that are specific to homelessness—dislodgment, expulsion, and deprivation of needed services—bear a discomfiting relationship of proximity (*conceptual*) to the experiences of social and political minorities, both in mainstream society and "among their own." Indeed where stable identity is concerned—and this is difficult to write, but necessary to consider—homelessness may be a kind of general condition. As our social interchanges and political problems become more complex and peripatetic, this experience only gains in intensity. In this very circumscribed but real sense, then, the homeless are but the most visible proof of contemporary societies' procedures for jettisoning certain subjects from the governing spheres of viability/representability, in order to provide the securest dwelling for those thought best to exemplify or defend society as we know it, and thus to ensure the persistence of the reigning imperative forms in a given culture. Yet when recognized as occupying an integral relation to "the rest," these subjects come to be seen as still more crucial for inciting cognizance (not just "awareness") of the inescapability of excess.

To appreciate the implications of Pope.L's actions with regard to this condition, we must revise now-conventional views of the subject's interaction with others, including the casual poststructuralist positions according to which the dissolution of subjectivity is permissible only on the condition that the subject can regather elsewhere such as in a plenitudinous hybridity or diasporism. Keeping up with Pope.L's practice, on the contrary, typically entails losing track of its subject as he slides between incongruent positions and states, making his body a performance of identity's *not given but provisional, difficult, and dangerous,* because foreclosing, attachment to the self. In observing or participating in the performance itself, one gains the acute sense that Pope.L's condition is simply one of being in the world with others with relatively minimal interest in submitting to any modality of being that would foreclose the possibility of another cropping up, or sharing its place. That is, Pope.L's metaphorizing of a dispossession central to contemporary experience—as "have-not-ness" or "lack worth having"—begins with the internal differencing practices through which one either becomes or does not become a subject. The encounter with Pope.L's experimental embodiments steeps us in that ignorance of the other that dawns when her or his knowability is no longer guaranteed. That is to say, it promotes that aspect of the other's unknowability which reveals to us our own, enlarging self-doubt, compelling reflection—breaking the hard texture of social practice with the accident of encounters writ small. The goal appears, quite simply, to be to decenter the type of knowing with which one keeps others at bay, leaving them to their difference. That this unknowing is connective, capable of establishing a context for the type of bond that knowing can actually undermine, is perhaps the hardest, and most crucial, part of the wager to accept.

To willfully decenter knowing does not mean giving it up. But it may mean no longer counting on knowing as a strategy to keep others,

or differences for that matter, at bay. As Judith Butler has argued recently, this also presents us with the likelihood that an identity is not "precisely a possession, but, rather . . . a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another."[32] As a practice that connects everybody, utterly, identity is an instrument with which we submit to, and enter relationships of responsibility with, one another. Butler further suggests that political arrangements can undermine their own goals when they prioritize coalitional integrity above all else, thus eroding the ground of cohabitation with and respect for the other that makes corporeality and identity always a matter of compromise and negotiation—and even concession. This outlook renders identity an effect of actions that are undeniably public and collective. Therefore, there can be no ridding of spatial conflict from identity's domain, such as the conflicts Pope.L literally embodies in his crawls. Identity functions as a kind of provisional dwelling, formed in our willful passage through others and theirs through us, just as it is deformed in the unplanned detours we take through others and they through us. This entropic model warns against the occupation and deployment of identity spaces as if they are aggregate or final. In both its cultural and political senses, the "body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine."[33]

Yet we need a ground for our claims, since it is neither possible nor desirable to renounce the realness of our differences when survival remains the key question for countless persons and constituencies, remaining central to their resistant representations. Indeed it is the very difficulty of thinking identity and politics this way—that is, in vigilant accordance with the eccentricity basic to intersubjective social experience—that supplies an aesthetics of dispossession with a starting question: "If I am struggling for autonomy, do I not need to be struggling for

something else, as well, a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well, and in ways that are not fully in my control or clearly predictable?"[34] This political agnosticism does not disavow action but challenges us to think action anew, in a full awareness of our corporeal and identitarian vulnerability. An aesthetics of dispossession mobilizes against representations that would deny the vulnerability that obtains not only in the site of the subject and its authenticating discourses,[35] but, most importantly for our purposes, in subjects' interchanges with these discourses. It envisions the look and feel of this immersion, impression, impingement, and unpredictability. In the case of Pope.L's actions, this aesthetics imagines new forms of affiliation and articulates this imagination in radically reconfigured performances of self full of compromised and therefore undermined identity signs. Attacking the norms and forms by which a subject might be known, these works present the subject not as a creative sovereign but rather as a kind of creative medium that makes and is unmade in the sheer variety and continuousness of its relations to the means of subjectivization. This subject represents an alternative to the standpoint-driven subject of identity politics by opening the "array of sometimes incommensurable epistemological and political beliefs and modes and means of agency" by which a particular subject may arrive at the need for action.[36] Central to Pope.L's aesthetics of dispossession are those performed instances of ungathered selfhood where he "appears" as a set of signs that are evident to the viewer as in the process of being negotiated.[37] To speak of the "aesthetics" of dispossession is decidedly not to render a systematically dispossessed subpopulation convenient fodder for solipsistic creative practice. Rather, in works such as *Great White Way* and *Tompkins Square Crawl*, we see the same body organized not according to constancy or identifiableness, but reorganized

according to the specific antagonisms inflecting Pope.L's changing sense of his political constitution in relation to specific problems. For all their formal affinities, these projects stand apart as unique responses to two imperative forms of cultural politics, *Great White Way* in seeking critically to address iconographies of race and gender newly reconsolidated in response to national trauma; and *Tompkins Square Crawl* in making manifest, however unwittingly, the price paid for the retention of upward mobility as the necessary condition of being black, American, middle-class, and a man. Both works succeeded in their ways to collapse on a small scale a preexisting order "structured" by race, class, gender, and sexuality through an insubordinate identification, or voluntary dispossession.

Pope.L's actionist practice dwells in the unresolved interplay of excess and dispossession through which we come to know the world, showing it to be an insistently actual, social affair by showing that meetings between subjects, at a certain level, are consequential struggles with the intangibility of identity. Pope.L posits the intersubjective as a site of production where the interaction of making and unmaking not only forms the dynamic basis but, more importantly, produces more than identity can account for. As the crawls make painfully clear, to aestheticize dispossession is not necessarily to metaphorize it or to make it pretty. Rather, Pope.L's practice attends to what makes dispossession particularly devastating for some by exploring the mode of its connection to all. More specifically, dispossession functions as a way to unbalance and therefore undermine a capitalist model of identity—the very model that sustains black representational space by constantly renovating it for new markets—with forms that represent culture at its most "troubled" and

that obstruct consumption. The subversive instrumentalization of commodities in relation to the body, such as the superhero costume and the business suit, plays a key role here. Pope.L views them as sites among which signs of culture circulate just as furiously as they do between human subjects. Pope.L affirms their capacity to symbolize social identity, but never simply; rather, he uses them in configurations that stimulate our consciousness of antagonism. By viewing commodities always in their varied forms of "attachment" to personhood, Pope.L makes them illustrative of how the basic contradiction of capitalism, between the forces of production and the social relations of production, impacts upon the meanings of personhood, and specifically identity. The powerful fixity of their symbolism allows them to generalize identities from their immersion in social processes, making them crucial aides to the determination of identity. And because commodities carry in them such strong implications of proper use, they powerfully visualize the rigidity of the social order. No mere symbols, then, the commodities employed in Pope.L's practice are crucial to his subversive reconstructions of the human situations that animate democratic culture.

Under well-functioning capitalism, the robust and rational circulation and use of commodities reflect the system's ability to preserve a balance between, on the one hand, the regimentation of objects and spaces required to dominate with them and, on the other, their fragmentation into markets, demographics, social groups, viewed as necessary for healthy economic relations. Following Henri Lefebvre, Deutsche has considered how that space is productive not only of homogeneity but also of certain configurations of difference:

> The spread of abstract space continuously heightens the contradiction between the production of space for profit and control—abstract space—and the use of space for social reproduction—the

> space of everyday life, which is created by but also escapes the generalizations of exchange and technocratic specialization. Abstract space represents, then, the unstable subordination of social space by a centralized space of power. This constitutive instability makes it possible for users to . . . undo [space's] domination by capitalist spatial organization.[38]

Harnessing this instability has been central to "creative disruptions of everyday life" by theorists, artists, and social collectives as diverse as CoBrA, Guy Debord, the Situationist International, Fluxus, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Gran Fury, among others.[39] Various forms of institutional critique have pursued a similar effect by disturbing or reorganizing established modes of aesthetic experience. Pope.L's practice partly stems from these and needs to be thought in relation to them. But Pope.L's ambition to create what he calls "fresh culture" recommends attention to the work's specific compositional linkage of specific economic and cultural phenomena, like race and art concepts: through site-specific placement, certain characterizations, fugitive quotidian materials connoting economic dispossession, and temporality more generally.[40]

The "constitutive instability" of abstract space informs the structure of everything produced in that space, including, most critically, the vehicles that formally link social spaces to the spaces of profit and control—or, human subjects, identities, and commodities in all their inseparable relation to one another. Spaces ordinarily considered "private," such as our bodies and identities, are as critical to this abstraction process as are more conventional venues such as parks or public squares or streets. Indeed, the management of identity and identifications depends upon emulative consumption practices through the reproduction of preexisting normative affiliations. The regularities enforced by such

practices are themselves essential for abstract space to continue to appear unalterable.

The creative occupation of the space we define can bring identity work out into the open and, arguably, produce new culture in the process. In a 1978 performance intervention enacted when Pope.L was fresh out of school, the artist situated an exploration of this theme amidst the social traffic flows that organize the mainstream art world as an abstract space. During this performance, *Thunderbird Immolation* (1978; fig. 5.7), Pope.L quickly realized that some commodities better evoke qualities linked to personhood because, in certain contexts, they bear social meanings that are both impossible to disavow and productive of stunning insight when combined. As literary historian Bill Brown writes, "Things and the history in things become conspicuous in the irregularities of exchange—in the retardation of the primary circuit of exchange whereas man establishes objects insofar as he is established by them. The question of things, even the question of whether they are, is inseparable from a question about what they do, or what can be done with them. For things compel our attention and elicit our questions only in their animation, their alternation between one thing and another."[41] Recurring examples in Pope.L's work of a related approach to things include his use of inexpensive wines such as Thunderbird and Wild Irish Rose, whose manufacturers have long targeted the black poor in their advertising.[42] Pope.L first used them in *Thunderbird Immolation,* for which he set up and occupied a makeshift meditation circle on a sidewalk in SoHo's then-emerging gallery district. Wearing a suit, Pope.L sat cross-legged atop a square of yellow fabric, inside a circle drawn in matches. In front of him he had arrayed a Coke can, one bottle each of the wines, and a yellow plastic mug containing a mixture of Thunderbird and Coke. A small crowd gathered, but Pope.L spoke to no one and never sipped the cocktail. As

5.7 William Pope.L, *Thunderbird Immolation*, 1978 (part of *Meditation Square Pieces*). Performance, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ellen LaForge. ALSO PLATE 17.

Kristine Stiles described the piece, "together, language and action established a visually volatile situation."[43] Pope.L remained in this position until a gallery employee came out and asked him to leave, whereupon he collected his things and left without ceremony.

Superficially, Pope.L's action drew attention to a schism between diametrically opposed "types" of urban dwellers, particularly between poor blacks and the predominantly nonblack, relatively well-to-do traffickers in SoHo galleries dominated by the "higher" arts of painting and sculpture. As an artist who could claim membership in both groups, however, Pope.L was positioned to reconfigure the separation between these populations as a function of connection, even interdependence. Of all Pope.L's accoutrements, it was arguably the bottle of Thunderbird, a drink of choice for many street dwellers that is also known as "bum wine," that most effectively asserted the "clear-cut" distinction between these constituencies and called for Pope.L's ejection by signaling an infiltration. While we cannot know the precise reason for his ejection, for the time and place it would have connoted the lingering presence of the homeless in a rapidly and thickly gentrified area. The overturned bottles—suggestive of dishevelment of the contained body come outside of itself—could also be said to "indicate" an impaired sense of place, amplifying with the force of paranoia the threat already implied by Pope.L's blackness and generally ill-defined purpose. The ejection performed in the interest of business, then, could be justified as socially benevolent. All this for a couple of booze bottles? Yes, but not for them alone. There is also—always with Pope.L—to be considered the particular cultural map they draw in their siting, and from their positions relative to their thingly neighbors, Pope.L included. Thunderbird is thrown into sharp relief by the Coke can sitting benignly next to it but also, with its neutrality, thrusting the Thunderbird under the sign of a

menace. The bottle itself was likely only more *legible* as a problem than was Pope.L's actual presence, the weird ritualistic trimmings, or the setup's positioning well outside the sidewalk's traffic flow. The Thunderbird and all that it implied about the unfinished business of gentrification were the problems. Pope.L's ejection for being "bad for business," then, has implications far vaster than the gallery employee probably imagined. The ejection was in effect a homogenizing act that reveals how the contours of aesthetic space are drawn in order to separate it out from the context of conflictual social relations, but fail to separate it from them.

Probably *Thunderbird Immolation*'s most powerful image was swirling in the mug from which Pope.L never drank. With this inaction, Pope.L never underwent the transformation from peaceful presence to inebriated invader whose *visualization* constituted the realest threat present on the sidewalk that day. Indeed, in that mug lay *Thunderbird Immolation*'s optimistic image of potential. With its integration of symbolic contents (black Coke, white wine), the cocktail swirling in the mug offered an image of the code-clashing aesthetic and cultural heterogeneity that Pope.L's action, as that of a performance artist descended from the black poor, effectively insinuated into the space of art—a space then fiercely resisting the challenge being posed on multiple fronts to traditional artistic mediums and ideologies. *Thunderbird Immolation* also demonstrates the power with which Pope.L enlists such forms not merely as expedient signifiers of identity, but as condensations of "affective social formations" in all their complexity.[44] When viewed as his coconspirators in the culture-remaking process, Pope.L's materials became emblems of a larger distributive practice that helps him explore the human condition in terms of constant dispersal, hindrance of gathering, and release from functional expenditure. Their profligate character

serves him precisely as a way to subvert that tendency in the prevailing cultural economy to devalue or discard whatever exceeds averages, be they persons deemed surplus to requirement, or modes of representation and critique that stimulate rather than subdue instability.

As feminist interventions such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside* (1973; fig. 5.8) had shown, the antinormative occupation or use of foreknown identity spaces draws attention to the abstractive processes that maintain fixed identity positions. This was specifically accomplished through subversive acts revealing the identity work that at once brings them into being and is reinforced in them. In one stage of this multipart work, Ukeles scrubbed the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, partly blocking access to the museum, in an action that brought attention to the coding of maintenance work as feminine as well as to the relative positioning of "women's work" within the prevailing institutional structures of art.[45] Ukeles also pointed up the implications of doing such labor not only in public but as a creative rather than strictly functional act. Her overall *Maintenance Activity* reconfigured as integral and representable the value of a form of work ordinarily thought to be best accomplished when it goes unseen.[46] In the present discussion, Ukeles's differential occupation of space resonates in two important ways: first, in its concrete appropriation of space; and second, in its revelation through "an insubordinate characterization" that identities themselves (in Ukeles's case, woman and artist) are ordered like spaces. Ukeles's example underscores the component of work, particularly in relation to the occupation of actual and identitarian spaces. A similar concept of work appears to be operative in Pope.L's performance interventions. Pope.L's inquiry also reconfigures identity as a function of work, pinpointing the relationship of maintenance to identity, though in more general terms. He suspends

5.8 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, 1973. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery.

his actions in the space of indeterminate social interactions in order to reveal how identity itself is constantly *worked*—that is, worked on, worked out, worked over, and reworked—and how it struggles to locate itself in its structuration in economic relations and annexation as abstract space. These actions suggest that identity's "meaning," then, is never more than approximated from the accumulation of materialized identity effects that fill experience—or, as above, the composition of existence as knowledge. In a criticism pitched squarely against the extreme accumulations peculiar to fascism, Bataille viewed the focused consideration of the "forms particular to affective life" as a necessary counter-authoritarian practice, explaining:

> Not only are the psychological situations of the democratic collectivities, like any human situation, transitory, but it remains possible to envision, at least as a yet imprecise representation, forms of attraction that differ from those already in existence.... A system of knowledge that permits the anticipation of the affective social relations that traverse the superstructure and perhaps even, to a certain extent, do away with it, must be developed from these possibilities.[47]

I want to suggest that Pope.L's emphasis on the identity work accomplished through creative models of attraction trains attention on the surplus that escapes the average, yielding "a yet imprecise representation" of the sort Bataille evokes here. Pope.L effectively relocates identity in the realm of affective social relations because it is in interaction with the material world that we both find our identities and also lose them. Consumables function in his practice as inescapably literal demonstrations of this fact. With their use of decomposition and flux, as well as their often cheesy deployment of black/white contrast, they remind us that social instabilities can be tracked as they produce the

contradictions that will embarrass any attempt to average out subjects and categories.

In what many of those whom he engaged considered a particularly confounding move, Pope.L enacted *ATM Piece* at a bank across from Grand Central Station on a busy winter weekday in 1997 (fig. 5.9). Wearing only work boots and a skirt fashioned from eighty one-dollar bills, Pope.L tied himself to the street side of the ATM foyer door using an eight-foot length of sausage. He intended to offer one dollar each to users of the ATM as they left, but within seconds he was surrounded by security officers who removed him to the edge of a ten-foot boundary that had recently been established as New York City law to keep solicitors away from ATM users.

In fact, this very law had provoked Pope.L's ATM performance.[48] The apparent goal was to test the parameters of the notion of "menace" by occupying the customary place of a person poised outside the bank door in an overtly benign way. Typically, when someone outside an ATM asks us for money, we seldom ask why; if the reason for the request isn't apparent to us, it should be. But *ATM Piece* afforded its audience no such clarity. Rather, the upshot of Pope.L's action proved the astonishing roominess of the category "menacing" as well as its striking inattention to detail. Pope.L's attire and behavior directly and intentionally contradicted the role he was assumed to play, yet they resulted nevertheless in his rejection by two recoiling customers and his rapid ejection by security officers. If *ATM Piece* suggested that certain kinds of meaning assignment are unavoidable and incontrovertible, it could also be deemed a successful deployment of opacity, given that, in the end, no charge could be brought against Pope.L stronger than that of creating discomfort. In this way, Pope.L caused, if only for a moment, his interlocutors' respective relationships to social and legal positivities, such as the black male menace and the broken law, to slide from knowing to uncertain.

5.9 William Pope.L, *ATM Piece*, 1997. Performance, New York. View: patron. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Lydia Grey. ALSO PLATE 18.

With *ATM Piece*, Pope.L also made strange the anonymizing familiarity of the figure of the panhandler. Pope.L presented witnesses with the laborious task of sorting out all that the artist had done to disintegrate a stereotypical figure, in part by momentarily turning bank customers themselves into the panhandlers.[49] Additionally, his witnesses had to read and seek to understand the spectacle of contraries into which he had rendered himself (apparently he went to some trouble in doing so, for the deftly sewn skirt of dollar bills is a feat of construction unto itself, and, as the video of the action reveals, it took longer for Pope.L to tie up the slippery sausage chain than it did for security to arrive). For another, by dressing himself only in free money, Pope.L effectively invited customers to "spend him down," an offer that came with the possibility of revealing what lurked beneath the skirt: the legendary black penis, already referenced euphemistically by the sausages.[50] Yet in making himself an indigestible chain of consumables, Pope.L also became a terminally open chain of signifiers (fig. 5.10). Moreover, by positioning himself at a financial institution, Pope.L linked his representation of panhandling as a symptom of overproduction to the site, giving sheer economic form to a surplus that it neatly parcels out in dividends to the economically privileged.

In a statement, Pope.L expressed a desire for an "art symbolical of the leap we need to rid us of our peace."[51] Surely there is something anarchic in the positions Pope.L takes up vis-à-vis bodily, social, and symbolic space in these works. Even the trope of the "crazy street person" often summoned by his commentators seems more to domesticate his actions, making them familiar (if not pathologizing them) than to speculate about their critical interest. But in his actions, Pope.L enters bizarre relationships with external signifiers in order to assume forms not so easily subordinated to what we can account for. Rather, these actions can help clarify what Bataille called the "insubordination of

5.10 William Pope.L, *ATM Piece*, 1997. View: security officers. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Lydia Grey.

material facts," which follows from the "irresistible impulse to reject material or moral goods that it would have been possible to utilize rationally."[52] Those works of Pope.L's that are consequent upon such a rejection require more work than it takes to summon the "crazy street person." Pope.L's work so frequently becomes *our* work that it becomes grudgingly apparent as an always unfinished compositional labor that is irretrievably social. That is, we cannot ourselves retreat from its manifestation as a form of labor that is partly ours to do. As the artist put it while describing *eRacism*, a long-term performance-theater piece begun in 1993, "the audience's job is to juggle, swim, and contest to find their relation to the issues, as I struggled and continue to struggle to find mine. [In short,] there is no summing up."[53]

Pope.L's commitment to nonfunctional labor lays bare representations of identity, beginning with one's own, as forms of concrete labor that produce sets of signs for public use. It also suggests that while we work hard preparing these signs, they are never fully under our control. In Pope.L's practice, identities are never simply a matter of channels dug or of necessary surrender to "the system." Its subject is a perpetually occupied maker whose particular struggle with things imagines no victorious ending. Rather, he said in an interview with Lowery Stokes Sims, "Making is an important risk, not to be missed, even if it means making a mistake. Be: wrong and strong."[54] This attention to making discloses the ethical basis of any form of involvement with the social. Perhaps the most insistent aspect of Pope.L's actions emphasizes the power of the texture of experience to defy us to renounce involvement with the incoherencies that destabilize even the strongest of differences. Pope.L's materials evoke such strong, "obvious" oppositions as rich to poor, black to white, panhandler to creditor, art to nonart, cultural to economic—but materializes them so as to dislodge each from its customary modes of appearance and use, assuring that it is unthinkable

apart from its other and its structuring into that position. These symbolic actions, by blocking the fetishization of ciphers of identity at the level of their most simplified outer appearance, also convert them into vehicles for illuminating the incongruous conditions out of which representativeness and iconicity are wrested. These actions thus pose serious challenges to what has become a commonplace function for identity in contemporary aesthetic and political discourses. They allow participants to perceive identities only *in relation* to the elaborate and sometimes violent cultural practices that condition their emergence, those thought to be particular to viewing. If only momentarily, then, such actions sharpen our focus on the massively abstracting function of any representation of identity as a noncontingent site that subjects pass through, collecting meanings as they go. In considering them, we are steeped in the fragmented identity events through which we attempt to secure personhood for ourselves by way of others. These seem important insights to dwell on because they imply that, even under present circumstances, the possibilities of existing as we wish may be as close as the nerve to imagine security in another way.

Pope.L has articulated this broadly implicated position in varying degrees of proximity to institutions of art, exploring a number of the ways that conflictual social relations shape both the space and language of art. Some of his most fascinating insights come to light in surprising "revelations," as when he subjects something familiar, such as Robert Ryman's white monochrome paintings, to his microanalyses of material culture. Characteristically seizing the power of the "other" perspective to confound rather than clarify difference, he has unironically claimed Ryman as "an absent father. Stern and unpredictable. Showing up with gifts unannounced."[51] He has said that when he first encountered Ryman's paintings in the 1970s, he thought Ryman "must think he's some kind of super-hero who only eats white food and helps white people

by making only white culture."[56] But later, Pope.L commented, "Each time I encountered a new Ryman, I saw new possibilities for art-making. Indeed, I saw these possibilities in an art practice that, by definition, was doomed, according to certain critics, to a dead-end of stagnant self-definition and pointless tautology."[57] Here Pope.L illuminates a dimension of Ryman's practice that necessarily exceeds the grasp of its materialism and might easily be misunderstood as a social conceit to secure the racial invisibility of whiteness, but which Pope.L came to see as a forceful manifestation of difference-in-sameness, articulated in Ryman's modulation of the white surface. He seems to have identified in his own miscognition of Ryman's abstraction exactly what he could not abide in his own work: the production of "black art" forms that could suggest a blackness so fully abstracted from its material production that it appears to come, superhero-like, from beyond the created universe. Hence his problem: to transfigure the still and transparent idea of blackness that he himself might project into a profoundly unstable vocabulary of "blackness" in which neither he himself nor his creation is the privileged term.

In order to accomplish this task—perhaps the most difficult for a black artist inclined as he was—Pope.L realized that he had to envision his art/action from the viewer's perspective, decentering and shifting attention away from himself and toward the actions that make viewers aware of the very processes underlying social perception. One example of such an awareness prompting is the marigold from *Tompkins Square Crawl*. Watching Pope.L struggle to keep the flower aloft, viewers may recognize a metaphor for the struggle of another life-form, the body of the homeless person. I will close this discussion with considerations of two other examples, both of which mount challenges to conventional thought about what it is that black artists do *apart* from making black art, by their focus on incongruities in the material conditions out of

which such representative forms have to be wrested. In both works, two subcomponents of a two-week, multipart performance entitled *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?* (1991), Pope.L took up the place of the object—a location from which it is perhaps hardest to resist the reification of a blackness that appears fully abstracted from its production in socially embedded processes. Naturally the already significant difficulty of destabilizing the seemingly indisseverable link that merely conjoins "black artist" and "object" to yield "black art" is compounded somewhat for a performance artist. Yet the challenge Pope.L appeared to give himself with these works was somehow to displace the authority of the body-object within that scheme, and shift attention to the very processes underlying racialized reception, within and beyond the context of art.

For the first, executed on a hot evening in late July of 1991, Pope.L took a seat in a chair upon a small stage he built in the front window of a gallery (fig. 5.11). Clad only in a pair of white underwear and sitting behind a small television facing the audience, Pope.L's stated purpose was to screen a tape of the *Tompkins Square Crawl* and to read aloud from journals relating to his street works. But the performance was in fact split between Pope.L's recitation for the gallery audience and his display as a ware for passersby outdoors. Both object and action, the work effectively interpenetrated the spaces of the gallery, window, and street—as well as the possible significations accruing to Pope.L's presence in each. Pope.L himself figured this slippage by smearing his body with mayonnaise at the start of the performance. Though its whiteness faded quickly in the sweltering heat, the mayo lingered: clumping in some places, polishing him to a high shine in others, and filling the space with a putrid odor. Thus in addition to heightening the fetishistic ethos generated by the shine and shop-window setting, the mayonnaise (the recharged commodity of record for this action) made the work uncomfortably

5.11 William Pope.L, *I Get Paid to Rub Mayo on My Body (version #1)*, part of *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?*, 1991. Performance, Franklin Furnace, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Marty Heitner.

sensed for those present. For smelly art—obviously—cannot be experienced passively; it penetrates, and therefore compromises the viewer's space in a way that odorless art cannot. Because to a very real extent such art *enters* us, we are oddly alive to its presence within, and impact upon, a situation of which we are a part. (Pope.L described the smell as "heavy and a bit sickening [bodily].")[58]

For those present to witness the smear, the mayonnaise would have had the added effect of making Pope.L "white," if only fleetingly. But this whiteness literally faded, giving way to blackness—in the sense of begrudgingly conceding space to blackness (though leaving its mark as a "reflective" sheen)—an action that *released* the two terms from absolute relation, rearticulating them in an "interchange of tones."[59] The conceptual manipulation of whiteness, in other words, was integral to what Pope.L seemed to be trying to do with blackness. At this point, one surmises, audience members could have become aware of an affinity between their spectatorship and that of the people in the street. Sandwiched between these two audiences, Pope.L was himself illustrative of a theoretical and practical collusion between the fetishized "black object" and the demonstrative work of "black art," two terms whose interdependence fixes the ideological overvaluation of the figure of the black artist. Yet Pope.L's action, to the contrary, appeared to illustrate the radical insufficiency of either to account for it. To the side of the black object, ordinarily well displayed for overdetermination from without, he turned his back literally and symbolically, to that of black art, by making himself shiny and stinky as if decaying before the audience's very eyes, Pope.L rearticulated the category around an object figured in a state of loss. This double-sided construction positioned both discourses as compensatory and grasping, since neither could quite constitute its object without confronting a specific life form—Pope.L's body as "a particular, excessive fact"[60]—pitched against its enclosing generality, or

indeed without passing into the other. In this way, it posed precisely the questions precluded by an account of black artists' work that needs artists and objects for its project, but neither historicizes practitioners in their distinctness of experience nor understands practices in terms of the very strict circumstances and terms of their appearance—questions about history and discourse, subjectivity and power, as well as what counts as black art and who gets to make that determination.

Pope.L has described his use of white products—including mayonnaise, flour, garbage bags, milk—as providing him with "quirky" materials "to deal with issues black people claim they don't value very much—whiteness."[61] He has said, "I confound black desire with white thingness."[62] Here, "black desire" evokes that desire *for blackness* which pervades contending representational regimes, black and nonblack, and sustains what Gilroy has called its "special communicative powers"[63] in what is always already an integrationist procedure. For Pope.L, stymieing his significatory function with "white thingness" is but a stark and exceptionally "user-friendly" way to bring the recognition that blackness, like black art, is a site of a spatial contest (only one of whose grounds is the body), not the special communication of ineffaceable fact. Yet the flagrantly histrionic whiteness that Pope.L takes on in these performances ever "returns" to blackness which, in resurfacing, comes to appear all the more ineradicable. The appearance of the hardened relative fixity of race categories, in fact, was the only discernible subject matter of the second 1991 performance, entitled *Selling Mayonnaise for 100 Dollars a Dollop* (fig. 5.12), for which Pope.L attempted unsuccessfully to do just that. In various Manhattan locations over several extremely hot and humid July days, Pope.L crouched against a building for a couple of hours at a time, two open jars of mayonnaise set in front of him along with a (white) plastic spoon.[64] As they approached, passersby were made an offer ("Warm mayo?") they had little choice but to refuse but which

5.12 William Pope.L, *Selling Mayonnaise for 100 Dollars a Dollop*, 1991. Performance, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photo: James Pruznick.

also, when fully contemplated, set before them, imagelike, Pope.L's absurdist staging of the black-white relation at its most Manichean. The sight of Pope.L in the company of those jars is nakedly comic, whether as the sort of sidewalk folly that many pedestrians doubtless took it to be, or as what it probably was, a take on the chilling realness of race concepts' structuring of our environment liable to be overlooked, yet not completely. Indeed staggeringly, after only a few seconds' adjustment to the image, one can aparanoiacally observe, across the long span separating Pope.L's humanly substantial, embodied blackness from the mayonnaise's grossly synthetic whiteness, the furious workings of the same logic that maintains black and white as commanding positions in symbolic economies of difference. Yet *Selling Mayonnaise*, rather than submitting its components to overdetermination by race concepts, used the insurgent texture of their specificity to break the surface calm those concepts would impose. In this instance, Pope.L launched the insubordination from the side of white, and through no particular action of his own beyond having selected mayonnaise as his dancing partner. This was a particularly eloquent choice, for mayonnaise, removed from its ideal environment, projects a whiteness that has precisely nothing fixed about it. Without refrigeration, the substance separates, rapidly when heated, and eventually goes black.

By variably suspending whiteness in the resting points of what will be taken by most as a work of black art, Pope.L brought about an intensified perception of the many disputable, determinate facts at work in, and on, the situation. This would have had the effect of significantly reducing the "special communicative powers" that might accrue to any single one of those facts, and perhaps of limiting the scope of their collaborative abstraction. Racial representation is transformed into a practice of integration: with the transparency of its signifiers rescinded, it is, on the one hand, evident as a process that is necessarily inclusive of the

externalities that give it its meanings, and on the other, compromised in its strength as a differencing action.

In none of the foregoing examples is the work of Pope.L's art distinguishable from the concrete labor of unmaking and remaking the identities by which he or it might be recognized. One cannot extract either critical operation, art work or identity work, from the social-material process in which it elaborates itself: the public production and exchange of signs and meanings, and the transformations of history and culture brought about by these practices. In this regard, Pope.L's tactical uses of whiteness join his resymbolizations of other cultural positions as elements of a creative reflection on the structurally collaborative nature of all identity-making practice and the broadly dispossessive character of living amidst differences. His art's arguments for the acknowledgment of these dimensions within the space of our self-representations are perhaps most controversial for their emphasis on choice—as opposed to destiny, responsibility, or obligation. As in "I can choose how I construct the legend of where I come from,"[65] where "choice" stands less for freewheeling invention than for a radically alternative understanding of inheritance and of what's necessary for survival. In this regard, these arguments rhyme with those implicit in the works by Julien, Ligon, Walker, and Wilson discussed above, and in so many examples not taken up here. The histories which their work obliges us to begin to construct look, sound, and feel different from the ones from which their work appears to wander. They proceed in a resistant engagement with the procedures that seek to assign and bind subjects to prefigured histories. These histories are *themselves* "performances of self," in the sense Stuart Hall gave this term in a passage cited near the start of this book. It is worth remarking a similarity between them and the one Michael Rogin describes in a seminal reading of the identity work that blackface did for Al Jolson's character in *The Jazz Singer:* "Evoking an imagined alternative

community identity, blackface frees the performer from the pull of his inherited, [in this case] Jewish, communal identicalness. The depersonalizing mask reaches a substrate of emotional expression out of which a new selfhood is born."[66]

This should go without saying, but it can't: it is too easy to understand this as a way of trying to be what one is not. The opposition between communal identicalness and imagined community is always far more complicated than it appears, which is to say that it is irresolvable. After all, Jolson's character is a performer whose life is structured by a steady routine of going in and out of blackface, in what is, for him, a contracting and expanding movement between inheritance and alternative. In this extremely pertinent model, unsteadiness frees: livable subjectivity entails a passing between inheritances and alternatives that is necessitated by the insufficiency of both. The story of such a condition talks of a striving to achieve oneself in this multidirectional activity, without the comfort of expedient victory over its dispossessing aspect—not even in one's art. Pope.L's actions bear out this difficulty, as performances that attempt to alter the subject's relation to materialized identity forms but are continually marked by futility. Yet for the artist, "The futility is the magic."[67] Indeed all the artists discussed in this book seem to permit the *simultaneously obdurate and intimate character of the constraints against which they work* to shape the character of their works, and thereby to provoke a rethinking of the roles—and relationships to history—of countless other black artists in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture. While Julien's, Ligon's, Pope.L's, Walker's, and Wilson's practices are most responsibly taken up independently—they will mercilessly starve any serious effort to unify them—when viewed together, they demonstrate the special power of the critical, creative engagement of limits to ensure that the unthinkable is not only thought, but comes to take some shape in our time.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO SEE A WORK OF ART IN TOTAL DARKNESS

1. The exhibition ran from November 14, 2002, to February 1, 2003, at the Ace Gallery. For a relevant contextualization of *Concerto*, see Glenn Ligon, "Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness," *Artforum* (September 2004): 242–249.

2. See Peter Schjeldahl, "The Walker: Rediscovering New York with David Hammons," *New Yorker*, 23/30 December 2002, 156–159.

3. See Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," in James Chandler, Arnold Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Questions of Evidence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 375, 384.

4. This sentence interpolates a part of Karen Swann's reading of a passage in Samuel Delany's autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water*. Swann, quoted in Scott, "Evidence of Experience," 384.

5. If *Concerto* resisted its own commodification, it did so incompletely: Hammons is said to have priced *Concerto* according to the amount of space, measured in square feet, that its purchaser intended to fill.

6. Calvin Reid, "David Hammons at Ace," *Art in America* 91:3 (March 2003): 114.

7. Charlie Finch, "Lie Down in the Darkness," <www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/finch/finch11-15-02>, accessed December 2002.

8. Geoffrey Jacques, "'Concerto in Black and Blue' by David Hammons," in *A Gathering of the Tribes*, <www.tribes.org/cgi-bin/form.pl?karticle=58>, accessed June 2003.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Jan Avgikos, review of David Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue*, *Artforum* (February 2003): 137–138.

12. See Guy McElroy et al., *African-American Artists, 1880–1987: Selections from the Evans-Tibbs Collection* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 9.

13. For an invaluable discussion of this sense of spatialization, see "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Peter Brunette and David

Wills, eds., *Deconstruction in the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. 21–22.

14. Avgikos, review of Hammons's *Concerto*, 137, 138.

15. Scott, "Evidence of Experience," 383; my emphasis.

16. This passage interpolates Michel Foucault's discussion of the imposing character of discourse in "The Order of Discourse" (1970), reprinted in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 51–78, esp. 67–69.

17. This distillation is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), 105. See also Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), 31–39.

18. See Christopher Fynsk, "Apartheid, Word, and History," *Boundary 2* 16:2–3 (Winter/Spring 1989): 7.

19. Sacvan Bercovitch offers an instructive warning about academic deployments of pluralism, when he calls it "a fixed match. A debate with a foregone conclusion and a ready formula for reaching it: fusion *and* fragmentation; a continual oscillation between harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony. It is the hermeneutics of laissez-faire. All conflicts are obviated by the continual flow of the one into the many, and the many into the one." Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 373.

20. Glenn Ligon, quoted in Roberta Smith, "Lack of Location Is My Location," *New York Times*, 16 June 1991, H27; my emphasis. Lawrence Rinder, "An Interview with Kara Walker," in *Capp Street Project: Kara Walker*, exh. text (Oakland: California College of Arts and Crafts, 1999), n.p.

21. William Pope.L, quoted in Lowery Stokes Sims, "Interview with William Pope.L," in Mark H.C. Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 66–67.

22. Anne M. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (California: University of California Press, 1996), 27.

23. This phrase is Herbert Marcuse's, from his *Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

24. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 14; emphasis in original.

25. Ibid., 285; my emphasis.

26. Homi K. Bhabha, introduction to *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 15.

1 BEYOND BLACK REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE

1. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 441–449.

2. David Scott, "Stuart Hall's Ethics," *Small Axe* 9:1 (2005): 1–16.

3. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 445.

4. Ibid.

5. For an account of this problem's impact on (the exhibitionary context), see Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1993), 233–258. Mercer configures the burden as originating in a scarcity of opportunities "to speak," such that when opportunities arise, one must fight the urge to tell the whole story in one go. In contrast, I am starting from the premise that all that *has* been said, in both its tendencies and sheer aggregation, constitutes a differently burdensome kind of problem, or more precisely, set of problems.

6. Kobena Mercer, to whose work I owe a special debt, has recently put special emphasis on this subject. See especially his introduction and contribution to Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

7. Although I will not pursue this theme here, these might be thought to emerge as early as the 1847 declaration of the independence of Liberia. The invention of a "benevolent" society of abolitionists and the world's second black colony, Liberia was conceived as a refuge for freed slaves.

8. As I discuss below, this effort was an extension of Du Bois's longstanding resistance to Booker T. Washington's promotion of worker training.

9. Harold Rosenberg, "A Guide for the Unperplexed," *Art News* 65 (September 1966): 47.

10. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Penguin, 1970).

11. Edmund Barry Gaither, quoted in Sharon Patton, "The Evolution of a Black Aesthetic," in her *African-American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 194.

12. William James, "Bradley or Bergson?" in *William James: Collected Essays and Reviews* (1920; New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), 492.

13. While writing admiringly of the advance effected in Henri Bergson's philosophy, James observes that "Bergson drops conception—which apparently has done all the good it can do; and, turning back towards perception with its transparent multiplicity-in-union, he takes its data integrally up into philosophy, as a kind of material which nothing can replace." Ibid., 492.

14. Many have addressed this issue in Fanon. See especially Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), and *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

15. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109. Subsequent references to this work, hereafter cited as BSWM, are given in the text.

16. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962), esp. 100–108 and 346–365.

17. Homi K. Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 40–65, 46.

18. The optimism of *Black Skin, White Masks* is not upheld in Fanon's later writing. His *Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington [1961; New York: Grove Press, 1963]) is a desperate text composed nine years later. It infamously calls for the kind of "true revolution," achievable only by a *fellaheen* (peasants' revolt) that ends with the destruction of white people. This Fanonian text was subsequently mobilized by revolutionary militants. Two important contextual points about *Wretched:* first, the prospect of successful revolutionary initiatives was much nearer to Fanon and his comrades in 1961 than in 1952; and second, not irrelevantly, *Wretched of the Earth* was written by a man of thirty-six facing untimely death from leukemia.

19. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 381.

20. Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?," in Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 17.

21. Ibid., 35.

22. Ibid., 16.

23. Ibid., 18.

24. Fanon, "West Indians and Africans," in his *Towards the African Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 37.

25. Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon," 24.

26. Isaac Julien, "In Two Worlds: An Interview with Isaac Julien," *Sight and Sound* 7 (July 1999): 33.

27. Rosenberg, "Guide for the Unperplexed," 47.

28. Rosalyn Deutsche makes this point in a discussion of public art in "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 281–282, 285–286.

29. Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon," 20.

30. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), xxiii. Foucault's archetype is "man—the study of whom is supposed by the naive to be the oldest investigation since Socrates."

31. Ibid.

32. James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 117. Subsequent references to this work, hereafter cited as MNA, are given in the text.

33. The risk he took in doing so is perhaps underscored by the fact that Porter conducted his study in the grand mode of the period survey, then exemplified by Walter Pach's *Masters of Modern Art* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924).

34. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* [1903]. See also Arnold Rampersad, *The Imagination and Art of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), and Charles Flint Kellogg, NAACP: *A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

35. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). For a fascinating study of black political rhetoric that understands it as partaking in a jeremiad originating in Puritanism, see David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (1990; reprint, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

36. Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 369.

37. Ibid., 368.

38. For a discussion of this formation that centers interestingly on "the quest for cultural leadership" as a philosophical one, not simply managerial,

see Kenneth Mark Kempner, "The Search for Cultural Leaders," *Review of Higher Education* 26:3 (Spring 2003): 363–86. See also Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities* (Latham, N.Y.: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1985).

39. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 112.

40. Witness Alain Locke's 1936 claim issued in response to the Harlem riots of 19 and 20 May 1935 that "the same logic by which Harlem led the Negro renaissance dictates that it must lead the economic reconstruction and social reformation. . . . A Harlem community-conscious and progressively co-operative is infinitely to be preferred to a Harlem racially belligerent and distempered." Locke, "Harlem: Dark Weather-Vane," *Survey Graphic* 25:8 (August 1936), 457.

41. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Du Bois on Niagara," in Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, 11: From the Reconstruction Era to 1910* (New York: Citadel, 1951), 905.

42. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of the Races" (1897), in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 243. Much misunderstanding of Du Bois's early espousal of race positivism stems from this 1897 address, which speaks of race as "a vast family of human beings, generally of a common blood and language; always of a common history, traditions and impulses." Du Bois would later refer to this statement and remark, "Since then, the concept of race has so changed and presented so much of contradiction." Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1984), 166. For excellent accounts of the transformations in Du Bois's writing, see Kenneth Mostern, "Three Theories of the Race of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1996): 27–63; "The Black Atlantic: The Counterculture of Modernity" and "'Cheer the Weary Traveler,'" in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; and Bernard Bell, "A Genealogical Shift in Du Bois' Discourses on Double Consciousness as the Sign of African-American Difference," in Bernard Bell et al., eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 87–108.

43. Du Bois, "The Conservation of the Races," 245–246.

44. See also Du Bois, "The Immediate Program of the American Negro," *Crisis* 5:6, 210–212.

45. It bears acknowledging that both Du Bois and Locke did their most ardent culture work at the zenith of biologist assertions of black inferiority, and their respective politics reflect very much the spur of that context. In this way, their aesthetic agendas are themselves emblematic of the force of context upon the formulation of modes of resistance. In historical documentation, however, the creative activity of this period has achieved a similarly singular racial character, despite the number of important collaborations taking place at the time across racial lines and in "defining" locales. For example, little work yet exists that explores the traffic of Harlem Renaissance figures through the scene organized around Mabel Dodge's Greenwich Village salon. A very brief discussion of these collaborations can be found in Harold Cruse, "Harlem Background," in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 11–63.

46. Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 262. The sine qua non of Locke's enterprise was to give "school"-based legitimacy to black art. For Locke this meant uniting the Negro artist in a bond with Negro subject matter: "There have been notably successful Negro artists, but no development of a school of Negro art. Our Negro American painter of outstanding success is Henry O. Tanner. His career is a case in point. Though a professed painter of types, he has devoted his art talent mainly to the portrayal of Jewish and biblical types and subjects, and has never maturely touched the portrayal of the Negro subject" (Locke, "Legacy," 265–266). Locke realized his aim with the 1936 publication of his survey *Negro Art: Past and Present* (reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969). Du Bois concurred on this point: "Our great painter," Du Bois also wrote in 1925, "has in no sense contributed to American Negro Art," but "he is . . . a great American painter." Du Bois, "The Social Origins of American Negro Art," *Modern Quarterly: A Journal of Radical Opinion* 3 (October-December 1925), 53.

47. Locke, "Legacy," 264, 265.

48. *The Crisis* was among the most influential black periodicals at this time, with an average monthly circulation reported at 116,000. By the time Du Bois resigned in 1934, *The Crisis* had become a key organ for the dissemination of contemporary developments in the arts. The journal continues to be published today.

49. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Negro Art," *Crisis* 22 (June 1921), 55.

50. In February 1926 (*Crisis* 31:4, 165), Du Bois published a seven-item questionnaire, of which only one item departed from a yes/no format: "What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?"—a question that virtually answers itself. Responses to Du Bois's questions, written by notable black and white artists, writers, and publishers, were published in subsequent issues. In October of that year, Du Bois published his own response as "Criteria of Negro Art" in *Crisis* 32:6 (October 1926), 290–297. Du Bois had previously delivered this text as the keynote address at the NAACP annual conference; an editorial note noted that it was reprinted by popular demand.

51. Rampersad, *Imagination and Art*, 196.

52. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 296.

53. According to Gerald Horne and Mary Young, Du Bois "pronounced [the Harlem Renaissance] both a success and a failure as he became more conscious of the two audiences for [art] by blacks, one within the community and one outside. He tried to assure the white world that he was satisfied with the Renaissance, yet for the African American audience he suggested the movement had failed because it was too exotic and not sufficiently positive about black life." Horne and Young, *W.E.B. Du Bois: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), 96.

54. Du Bois, quoted in Rampersad, *Imagination and Art*, 194.

55. Du Bois, "The Criteria of Negro Art," 290.

56. Rampersad, *Imagination and Art*, 196.

57. Du Bois, "Social Origins of American Negro Art," 54.

58. Ibid., 53.

59. Ibid., 55.

60. Langston Hughes, "Here to Yonder: Books Are Friends," *Chicago Defender*, national edition, 23 December 1943, 10.

61. Charley Cherokee, "National Grapevine: Good Mawnin'," *Chicago Defender*, national edition, 1 April 1944, 13.

62. See Arthur A. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," in Locke, *The New Negro*, 231–237, 231. My emphasis.

63. Locke, "Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," 262.

64. Hale Woodruff, quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?," *Art News* 65 (September 1966): 48.

65. See Gale Gelburd, "Romare Bearden in Black and White: The Photomontage Projections of 1964," in Gelburd and Thelma Golden, eds., *Romare*

Bearden in Black and White: Photomontage Projections, 1964 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 18.

66. Siegel, "Why Spiral?," 48–49, 50.

67. This term is Judith Butler's, from her "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Henry Abelove et al., eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 312. Butler's arguments here and elsewhere—both in their content and their openness to transposition—have enormously impacted my thinking about relations among black identities and the various practices and interests that would represent them.

68. Siegel, "Why Spiral?," 50. In a passage that reflects the hypostatizing view of such gatherings in subsequent readings, Leslie King-Hammond goes even further in order to achieve accord among Spiral's members. King-Hammond attributes the group with "formalizing" the way black artists could do politics: "Most importantly (and unbeknownst to them) they would formalize the process and means by which Black artists would collectively address themselves to the issues of organizational solidarity, cultural awareness and the development of a visual language, an iconography, which would speak directly to black people." King-Hammond, "Search for an Aesthetic Identity: The Art and Politics of the Black Artist in the Sixties," in *Selected Essays: Art and Artists from the Harlem Renaissance to the 1980s* (Atlanta: National Black Arts Festival, 1988), 53.

69. See the discussion of political signification in Butler, "Imitation," 312.

70. Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a Populist Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 74.

71. Kobena Mercer, "African-American Modernism at Mid-Century," in Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, eds., *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Williamstown and New Haven: Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press, 2002), 43. Mercer's interpolations.

72. Among the most vocal campaigners for Black Arts were Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez. For Neal, "implicit in the Black Arts Movement is the idea that Black people, however dispersed, constitute a nation within the belly of white America." Quoted in Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 257. Important primary sources include Amiri Baraka, "The Black Arts Repertory Theatre School," *Liberator* (February 1965): 21; Baraka, *Black Art* (Newark: Jihad Productions, 1966); Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," in Baraka and Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York:

Morrow, 1968); Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12:4 (1968): 29–39; Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony* 24 (1969): 54–58; and James Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," in Baraka and Neal, eds., *Black Fire*. Seminal documents of Black Arts and Black Aesthetics are collected in Addison Gayle's rich anthology of 1971, *The Black Aesthetic*.

73. Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 174.

74. Larry Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future* (St. Paul: Thunder's Mouth, 1989), 24.

75. Don L. Lee, "The New Integrationist," in *Black Pride* (Detroit: Broadside, 1968), 11.

76. Don L. Lee, *Think Black!* (Detroit: Broadside, 1967), 6.

77. John O. Killens, quoted in Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 235.

78. Lee, *Think Black!*, 6.

79. See Ralph Ellison, introduction to *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*, exh. cat. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York at Albany Art Gallery, 1968). The essay was reprinted as "The Art of Romare Bearden," in Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 227–238. For a discussion of Ellison's text in the context of these works, see Mercer, "African-American Modernism," and Mercer, "Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen," in his *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, 124–145.

80. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 228. Ellison's emphases.

81. On this relationship, see Paul Rogers's brilliant "Ralph Ellison, the Collages of Romare Bearden, and Race: Some Speculations," *International Review of African-American Art* 10:3 (1994): 7–10. See also Albert Murray, ed., *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

82. Mercer, "African-American Modernism," 43.

83. See Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995).

84. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 228. Ellison's emphasis.

85. For a discussion of this theme, see my "Ralph Ellison's Romare Bearden," in Ruth Fine and Jacqueline Francis, eds., *Romare Bearden: American Modernist* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, forthcoming).

86. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 233.

87. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

88. Though it is somewhat elliptically expressed, Porter's 1966 position on separatist aesthetics is worth noting here: "Present social conditions indicate the need to establish a greater cultural purpose in the heart of this nation. This must be accomplished, not merely for the sake of culture, but for peace and human salvation. The present militancy of the Negro relative to this necessity has been interpreted as the actual conscience of America pricking her.... To question the validity of such a viewpoint is to contemplate anew the present significance of American Negro art." Porter, "One Hundred and Fifty Years of Afro-American Art," in *The Negro in American Art*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: UCLA Art Galleries, Dickson Art Center, 1967), 12.

89. Porter branded Locke "segregationist" in a 1936 article in *Art Front*. James A. Porter, "The Negro Artist and Racial Bias," *Art Front* 3 (June-July 1937): 8–9. For Locke's reply, see Alain Locke, letter to editor, *Art Front* 3 (October 1937): 19–20. Porter's charges echoed those previously conveyed by Meyer Schapiro in "Race, Nationality and Art," *Art Front* 2 (March 1936): 10–12.

90. E. Franklin Frazier quoted in Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, 93.

91. Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, 93.

92. Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 372.

93. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 228. My emphasis.

94. Ibid., 234.

2 A NEW CONTEXT FOR RECONSTRUCTION: SOME CRISES OF LANDSCAPE IN KARA WALKER'S SILHOUETTE INSTALLATIONS

1. Unsigned editorial, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African-American Art* 14:3 (1997): 2.

2. Ibid., 2.

3. Ibid., 4.

4. See *Kara Walker: Upon My Many Masters—An Outline*, exh. text (San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art, 1997).

5. "Extreme Times," 4.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Michael Harris, quoted in "The Past Is Prologue but Is Parody and Pastiche Progress? A Conversation," IRAAA 14:3 (1997): 25–27.

10. I am using "countersignature" in the sense attributed it by Derrida in "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Peter Brunette and

David Wills, eds., *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9–32, esp. 18–20.

11. Howardena Pindell, "Diaspora/Reality/Strategies," *N.Paradoxa* 7 (August 1998). Accessed via <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradox/pindell.htm>.

12. Robert M. Stein, "The Task of the Historian," *History and Theory* 40:2 (2000): 266.

13. Kara Walker, quoted in Dodie Kazanjian, "The Cutting Edge," *Vogue* (May 2005): 274.

14. Kara Walker, quoted in Jerry Saltz, "Ill-Will and Desire," *Flash Art* (November/December 1996): 84.

15. This locution comes from Roland Barthes's "Change the Object Itself," his 1971 postscript to *Mythologies*. See "Change the Object Itself," in Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 165–169.

16. See especially Shaw's discussions of Negress, the persona by means of which Walker integrates her numerous public and artistic statements, historical representations of black women, and recurring characters in her work, in Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2005). For a contrasting view of Negress's function, see my "This Is Not about the Past: Silhouettes in the Art of Kara Walker," in Ian Berry et al., *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 140–167.

17. Kara Walker, interviewed by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, in *Kara Walker: Safety Curtain 1998/99*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Art Pool, Museum-in-Progress, and Vienna State Opera, 1998).

18. Ann M. Wagner, "Kara Walker: The Black-White Relation," in Berry et al., eds., *Kara Walker*, 95.

19. Kara Walker, quoted in *Look Away! Look Away!*, exh. cat., Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (September 23–October 22, 1995), 25.

20. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; London: Penguin, 1970), 218, 229.

21. Kara Walker, quoted in James Hannaham, "Pea, Ball, Bounce: Interview with Kara Walker," *Interview* (November 1998): 114–119.

22. Sigmund Freud, "On the University Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" (1912), in *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974), vol. 11, 188–189.

23. Kara Walker, quoted in Darius James, "'I Hate Being Lion Fodder,'" <http://www.deutsche-bank-kunst.com/art/02/e/magazin-interview-walker.php>, accessed 3 January 2004.

24. Kara Walker, "An Historical Romance," unpublished artist's statement, 1995, n.p.

25. Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 30.

26. See Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity," in his *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 40–65.

27. See David Joselit, "Notes on Surface: Towards a Genealogy of Flatness," *Art History* 23:1 (March 2000): 31.

28. Ibid., 32.

29. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, quoted in Joselit, "Notes on Surface," 32.

30. Walker, quoted in Robert Hobbs, *Kara Walker: Slavery! Slavery!* (Washington, D.C.: International Art and Artists, 2001), 30.

31. Homi Bhabha, "Articulating the Archaic," in *Location of Culture*, 134–135.

32. Hobbs, *Kara Walker: Slavery! Slavery!*, 34, 35.

33. Ibid., 35.

34. Ibid., 34, 35.

35. Wagner, "Kara Walker," 101.

36. This notion is explored in Sacvan Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

37. The first instance of this term that I know of is Walker, quoted in Saltz, "Ill-Will and Desire," *Flash Art* (November/December 1996): 84.

38. Walker, quoted in Ali Subotnick, "Kara Walker," *Make* 92 (2002): 26–27.

39. Michael Fried, "Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism," *American Scholar* 33 (1964): 642–648.

40. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 5, 6.

41. Walker, quoted in Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Everything Can Be Pictured in the Form of Shadows: A Conversation with Kara Walker," in Johannes Schlebrügge, ed., *Safety Curtain 1: Kara Walker* (Vienna: P & S Wien, 2000); and Lawrence Rinder, "An Interview with Kara Walker," in *Capp Street Project:*

Kara Walker, exh. text (Oakland: California College of Arts and Crafts, 1999), n.p. (emphasis in original).

42. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 16.

43. On this subject, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). For a compelling study of the panorama painting contracted to build public support for western expansion—John Banvard's now lost *Panorama of the Mississippi River*, billed in 1847 as "a painting three miles long"—see Angela Miller, "Space as Destiny," in Irving Lavin, ed., *World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 739–742.

44. John Singleton Copley, quoted in Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 94.

45. Frederic Church, quoted in Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 286. Such images often included staffage figures that oriented viewers in, or in relation, to the vista.

46. Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 9. My emphasis.

47. Ashis Nandy, quoted in Bhabha, "By Bread Alone: Signs of Violence in the Nineteenth Century," in *Location of Culture*, 200.

48. David M. Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 57.

49. Lynchings themselves were not by and large unpictured. See James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000). See also Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

50. On this subject, see Kenneth Cohen, "A Mutually Comprehensible World? Native Americans, Europeans, and Play in Eighteenth-Century America," *American Indian Quarterly* 26:1 (2002): 67–93.

51. Walker's "Negress" persona is loosely based on black female characters that appear in historical romance novels such as Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1905).

52. Tony Horwitz, quoted in Mark Reinhardt, "The Art of Racial Profiling," in Berry et al., *Kara Walker*, 111.

53. Reinhardt reads *Gone* in close detail in "The Art of Racial Profiling," 108–129.

54. Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 136.

55. Ibid., 137.

56. Ibid.

57. T. Addison Richards, quoted in John Michael Vlach, *The Planter's Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 28. See also William and T. Addison Richards, *Georgia Illustrated in a Series of Views—Drawn from Original Sketches by T. Addison Richards* (Penfield, Ga.: W. & W.C. Richards Publishers, 1842), and T. Addison Richards, "The Landscape of the South," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 36 (May 1853): 433–440.

58. Vlach, *The Planter's Prospect*, 28.

59. Gainsborough, quoted in Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 49.

60. Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 41, 42; my emphasis.

61. Hamza Walker (no relation to the artist), "Nigger Lover, or, Will There Be Any Black People in Utopia," *Parkett* 59 (2000): 152–165.

62. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 232.

63. Harris, "Past Is Prologue," 27.

64. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, quoted in Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture, a Project by Michele Wallace* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 33.

65. See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Christina Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Rural Landscape in England, 1780–1890*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

66. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Barbara Novak, "Self, Time, and Object in American Art," in Thomas Gaehtgens and Heinz Ickhardt, eds., *American Icons: Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Center, 1992), 80.

67. Novak, "Self, Time, and Object," 80.

68. Absorption is loosely affiliated here with Louis Althusser's description of the "hail" with which ideology interpellates subjects. "Loosely" because for Althusser subjects are always already interpellated. See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1969), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

69. Novak, "Self, Time, and Object," 82.

70. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" (1971), in *Image-Music-Text*, 155–164.

71. See Anne Rorimer, "Blinky Palermo: Objects, *Stoffbilder*, Wall Paintings," *Artforum* 12:3 (November 1978): 28–35. See also Gary Garrels, ed., *Blinky Palermo* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1987).

72. Lawrence Weiner, quoted in Anne Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 81.

73. Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1968; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 94.

74. Gregory Battcock, editorial note in ibid., 103.

75. Credit for this distinction is owed to Emile Benveniste, for whom it was a matter of *testis* (witness) versus *arbiter* or arbitrator. The former is presumed to have been present at the event about which an attestation is made. This distinction is discussed in conjunction with modern picturing practices in Jonathan Bordo, "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness," in Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 301.

76. A classic example here is Jan van Eyck's 1434 portrait of the Arnolfini wedding. For a discussion of this work in terms of witnessing, see Linda Seidel, *Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an Icon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

77. Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 123.

78. Ibid.

79. For this reading of the psychological distance-function of meaningful objects writ small, I am indebted to Rosalind Krauss's discussion of Joel Shapiro's small house sculptures in "Objecthood," *Critical Perspectives in American Art: An Exhibition Selected by Sam Hunter, Rosalind Krauss, and Marcia Tucker*, exh. cat. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1976), 25–27.

80. The distance implied by the scale and position of Walker's houses is such that surveying the figures' activity would seem to be impossible from it.

81. Charles Harrison, "The Effect of Landscape," in Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 232. In this essay, Harrison discusses landscape as a genre that "proposes a form of escape from this place" (232).

82. Ibid.

83. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoyevsky's Works" (1963), in David Sandner, ed., *Fantastical Literature: A*

Critical Reader (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 116–132; Bakhtin's emphases. For Bakhtin, the satirical form is exemplified by Menippean satire such as the *Apocolocyntosis* by Seneca, and the *Satyricon*, whose author is known, interestingly for our purposes, as Petronius Arbiter. These works are often published together. See Petronius Arbiter, *The Satyricon of Petronius and the Apocolocyntosis of Seneca*, trans. J.P. Sullivan (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

84. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

3 FANTASIAS OF THE MUSEUM

1. Fred Wilson, quoted in Donald Garfield, "Making the Museum Mine: An Interview with Fred Wilson," *Museum News* (May-June 1993): 48.

2. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

3. Wilson, quoted in Garfield, "Making the Museum Mine," 48.

4. This aspect of Wilson's early museology draws it into close proximity with Foucault's conception of genealogy: "And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the *constitution* of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the fields of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history." Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 59. My emphasis.

5. *Rooms with a View* ran for nearly two months at the Bronx Council on the Arts' Longwood Arts Gallery.

6. This is Bhabha's characterization of the voice of early modernist colonial literature. See Homi Bhabha, "Articulating the Archaic," in his *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 123.

7. Lois Nesbitt, "Fred Wilson at Metro Pictures," *Artforum International* 31 (November 1992): 105.

8. Fred Wilson, quoted in David Kelleran, "Fred Wilson at Metro Pictures," *Flash Art* 167 (November-December 1992): 98.

9. Wilson's work in this mode was largely suspended following the 1992 commission from the Baltimore Historical Society to reinstall its third-floor galleries, which led first to *Mining the Museum* and subsequently to Wilson's being constantly sought after by numerous museums around the world to serve as a resident artist.

10. See Fred Wilson, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors by Fred Wilson*, exh. cat. (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993).

11. For an excellent survey of Wilson's practice, see Maurice Berger, *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979–2000* (Baltimore: Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001). Elsewhere I have argued that aspects of Wilson's fabricated museums better accommodate the project of radical intervention than do his actual interventions. The latter works have attracted the bulk of attention, but in my view this is to the detriment of the "off-site" installations in which Wilson fashions hypothetical museum spaces. This work is important for me because of the intelligence and power of Wilson's suggestions about how the museum might be resited—practically by him, imaginatively by its publics—to fashion a more accurate historical picture of difference's eruption into fundamentally homogeneous frameworks. See "Institutionalizing the Postcolonial," in Darby English, "Black Artists, Black Work? Regarding Difference in Three Dimensions," Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 2002.

12. See *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Studio Museum of Harlem, 1990), and Jeanne Canizzo, ed., *Into the Heart of Africa* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1989).

13. An example is Lothar Baumgarten's *Unsettled Objects*, a series of slide projections compiled during an extensive photo-essaying of European ethnographic museums that Baumgarten conducted from 1968 to 1970. See *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000).

14. For an excellent survey of projects relevant to the prehistory of *Mining the Museum*, see Lisa G. Corrin, "*Mining the Museum:* Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves," in Lisa G. Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum*, exh. cat. (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1994), 1–22.

15. Andrea Fraser, "An Artist's Statement," in *Place Position Presentation Public*, ed. Ine Gevers (Amsterdam: De Balie, 1998), 70.

16. See Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). For a discussion of the role of the museum's discourse as a function of modernity's project, see Donald Preziosi, "Museology and Museography," *Art Bulletin* 77 (March 1995): 13–15.

17. For a discussion of this distinction, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," in James Chandler, Arnold Davidson, and Harry Harootun-

ian, eds., *Questions of Evidence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 368–380.

18. Crimp, "The Art of Exhibition," in *On the Museum's Ruins*, 249–250.

19. Fuchs, quoted in Crimp, "The Art of Exhibition," 249.

20. On this subject, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1984), esp. ch. 4; and Bennett, *Pasts beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

21. For several excellent studies that contextualize this problem, see Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), and Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), esp. chs. 2 and 5, important discussions of the functions of place in site-specific projects, in which *Mining the Museum* is briefly discussed.

22. Kwon, *One Place*, 147.

23. I will speak critically of Wilson's installation here but, as an advocate of Wilson's work, I feel that I should explain why I have found it necessary to do so. Until a comparably ambitious project challenges *Mining the Museum*, this approach makes sense for at least two reasons. First, because in dissertations, articles, textbooks, exhibition schedules, and museum boardrooms, *Mining the Museum* continues to stand as a benchmark for "black interventions" into the relations and politics of representation. And precisely as a benchmark, it risks forestalling the very work of perspectivizing "black experience" that is most needed to dismantle regimes of exemplarity. Second, because it generated a tension worth dwelling on, in offering little to no account of relational shifts between the past it surveyed and the present it occupied. In this way it *becomes* the history that it would claim to complicate. It is precisely because for so many *Mining* is a fixed, generative image in the iconography of multiculturalism in an increasingly internationalized art world that this deservedly illustrious project continues to warrant considerate debate, not just ceremonial invocation. As critical historians, it cannot suffice for us to congratulate the work for *starting* something; we must remain intent on expanding the project it may have inaugurated, on making noise about the limits it may inadvertently impose on our imagination of creative institutional change.

24. Lisa G. Corrin, "*Mining the Museum:* An Installation Confronting History," *Curator* 36 (December 1993): 302–331.

25. Fred Wilson, quoted in Leslie King-Hammond, "A Conversation with Fred Wilson," in Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum*, 34, 32.

26. George Ciscle and Charles Lyle, foreword to Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum*, lxxi.

27. Wilson, quoted in King-Hammond, "A Conversation," 33.

28. Ibid.

29. We are aided in our analysis by the excellent volume edited by Lisa Corrin that appeared in 1994, the year after *Mining* closed. In addition to containing a detailed photo record of the installation, the catalogue compiles texts that introduce the Maryland Historical Society, historicize the practice of institutional critique, recount the docents' experiences guiding tours of the installation, and even reproduce a number of handwritten audience response sheets. At the same time, it remains important to maintain some critical distance from the catalogue's documentary claims.

30. Corrin, "*Mining the Museum:* Artists Look at Museums," 13.

31. Ibid.

32. Jackson and Clay were the nominated candidates at the first presidential nominating convention, held in Baltimore in 1832.

33. Of these, one of the more discomfiting was Wilson's nod to his Native American heritage in a display ironically titled "Portraits of Cigar Store Owners." The title referred to the elision of stereotyped and actually existing Native Americans, which the display exposed by juxtaposing a quintet of wooden "cigar store Indians" arrayed to face a wall of documentary photographs and snapshots of working-class Native Americans.

34. See Edward J. Hagerty, *Collis' Zouaves: The 114th Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

35. Corrin, "*Mining the Museum:* Artists Look at Museums," 18.

36. Ira Berlin, "*Mining the Museum* and the Rethinking of Maryland's History," in Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum*, 45.

37. Kwon, *One Place*, 7.

38. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in *What Is Cultural Studies?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41.

39. For an important discussion of this theme as a practical guideline for "writing the history of differences," see Scott, "Evidence of Experience," 381.

40. Hall, "Cultural Studies," 43.

41. Elizabeth Cowie, "Fantasia," in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage and the Open University, 1999), 356–358.

42. Kwon, *One Place*, 146.

43. Cowie, "Fantasia," 366.

44. The work shares a title with a series of twenty-nine 49-by-40-inch digital prints made from photographs Julien took during and after the filming and later issued in editions of 16.

45. Isaac Julien, quoted in Domenick Ammirati, "My Pop: Isaac Julien," *Artforum* (October 2004): 110.

46. Joanne Martin (cofounder of the Great Blacks in Wax Museum), quoted in Ginger Williams, "Great Blacks in Wax Museum Expansion Underway," *New York Amsterdam News* 93:52 (26 December 2002).

47. The Contemporary teamed up with the Walters for *Baltimore*, which represents one instance in an interinstitutional series called "Facing Museums."

48. Isaac Julien, quoted in Eric Allen Hatch, "Wax in the House," *Baltimore City Paper*, 2 June 2004. For an account of the project's beginnings, see Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, "The Political Aesthetics of Isaac Julien's *Baltimore*," unpublished typescript, 2006, 35n.24.

49. Kwon, *One Place*, 53.

50. Massimo Cacciari, quoted in Patrizia Lombardo, *Cities, Words, and Images* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 115–116.

51. Roland Barthes, quoted in Homi K. Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity," in *The Location of Culture*, 60; emphasis added.

52. Mark Alice Durant, "The Great Blacks in Wax Museum, Baltimore MD," *Art US* 5/6 (January/February 2005): 54.

53. Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 90.

54. Michael Warner, introduction to Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xiii.

55. Isaac Julien, interviewed by Essex Hemphill, "Looking for Langston: An Interview with Isaac Julien," in Hemphill, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston: Alyson, 1989), 175–176, 180.

56. Cowie, "Fantasia," 358.

57. Joanna Russ, "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 6:2 (July 1975): 2. Reprinted in Russ, *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

58. Durant, "Great Blacks in Wax Museum," 55.

59. Melvin Van Peebles, quoted in Isaac Julien, director, *Baadasssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70's Blaxploitation Films*, videorecording (New York: Docurama, 2002).

60. Ed Guerrero, "The Black Man on Our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation," in Thelma Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Abrams, 1994), 188.

61. On this subject, see Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 2. For a contemporary response rooted in these concerns, see Lerone Bennett Jr., "The Emancipation Orgasm," *Ebony* 26 (September 1971): 106–116.

62. See especially "Visiting Hours," "Heavy Breathing," and "Notes," in Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (Philadelphia: Cleis, 1992).

63. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, quoted in Stuart Hall, "For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation," in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 303. Hall's emphases.

64. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Principles of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), 117–118.

65. Roy Innis, quoted in Julien, *Baadasssss Cinema*. Innis's emphasis.

66. This statement is taken from a newspaper headline that appears in Julien, *Baadasssss Cinema*.

67. Stan Douglas, whose films Julien claims as generative for him, has employed these devices in a number of films. They are discussed in Bérénice Reynaud, "Stan Douglas's 'Win, Place, or Show,'" in Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly, with Bettina Funcke, eds., *Robert Lehman Lectures on Contemporary Art*, no. 3 (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2004), 128.

68. Melvin Van Peebles, quoted in Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 91.

69. Auther and Lerner, "Political Aesthetics," 14.

70. On this function of belonging, see Neil Leach, "Belonging," *AA Files* 49 (Spring 2003), 76–82.

71. Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 256.

72. Ibid., 7; emphasis in original.
73. Ibid., 4; emphasis in original.

4 PAINTING PROBLEMS: GLENN LIGON'S POSTMODERNISM

Parts of this chapter appeared in earlier form in my "Glenn Ligon: Committed to Difficulty," in Wayne Baerwaldt and Thelma Golden, eds., *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, exh. cat. (Toronto: Power Plan Contemporary Art Gallery, 2005), 31–77.

1. Glenn Ligon, quoted in Byron Kim, "Interview with Glenn Ligon," in Judith Tannenbaum, ed., *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1997), 52.

2. Of course de Kooning and Ligon shared a historical "moment" from 1960, the year of Ligon's birth, to de Kooning's death in 1997. Here, by the word "moments" I refer to the apogees of their respective careers during this shared period.

3. For an excellent discussion of Ligon's use of language across media, see Richard Meyer, "Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language," in Tannenbaum, ed., *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, 12–35. For a survey of Ligon's practice that emphasizes the role of the text paintings within it, see my "Glenn Ligon: Committed to Difficulty."

4. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 299.

5. Thus these practices are vital to a history of the present committed to deriving a sustaining though impermanent language for those not-so-recent upheavals whose reverberations nevertheless can be felt today, sharply.

6. Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism" (1981), in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, 1984), 88.

7. See Roberta Smith, "'Lack of Location Is My Location,'" *New York Times*, 16 June 1991, H27.

8. See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Anne Middleton Wagner's discussion of Lee Krasner's relationship to modernism in *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), esp. 1–28 and 105–190; and Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

9. Ad Reinhardt, in Lee Nordness, ed., *Art: USA: Now* (Lucerne: Bucher; New York: Viking, 1962), 269.

10. Jonathan Flatley, "Warhol Gives Good Face," in Jennifer Doyle et al., eds., *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 104.

11. See Derrida on "habitation" in "Deconstruction and the Spatial Arts," in Peter Brunette and David Wills, eds., *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

12. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 2002), 127. I want to stress that I am using "perspective" here in two ways: in one, its sense is insistently visual, whereas in the other it is more general, as in the colloquial use of "perspective" to indicate a person's attitude or stance on or toward a particular issue.

13. Frank Stella, in Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Art News* 65:5 (September 1966): 60.

14. For good sketches of the relevant interventions, see Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985); Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: New Press, 1998); Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Francis Frascina, eds., *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (London: Open University; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

15. Michael Fried, "Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism," *American Scholar* 33 (1964): 646. My emphasis.

16. Amelia Jones, "Body," in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 255.

17. Key frameworks were presented in Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," reprinted in Wallis, *Art after Modernism;* Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism," parts 1 and 11, reprinted in Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

18. In a 1982 essay, Hal Foster elegantly summed up this aesthetic, suggesting that postmodernism "may be less a break with modernism than an advance in a dialectic in which modernism is re-formed." "Certainly," Foster

continues, "any serious notion of postmodernism must be proffered on the conviction that 'a system calling for corrections, translations, openings, and negations is more useful than an unformulated absence of system.'" Foster, "Re: Post," *Parachute* 26 (Spring 1982): 15.

19. Crimp, "Pictures," 175.

20. Ligon, quoted in Kim, "Interview," 52.

21. Ibid.

22. Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," 296.

23. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in Owens, *Beyond Recognition*, 173.

24. Ligon, quoted in Kim, "Interview," 51.

25. Hubert Damisch, paraphrasing Jean-Paul Sartre and quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting as Model," trans. John Shepley, *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 127.

26. Only the first work in the series quotes Genet's phrase verbatim. In the remaining three we see Ligon, with his own rarely appearing words and in a shifting voice, doing things with Genet's words: "We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning"; "Why must we be the ink that gives the white page a meaning?"; and, as illustrated here, "When I said that we were the ink that gives the white page a meaning that was too easy an image."

27. I am paraphrasing Hubert Damisch, quoted in Bois, "Painting as Model," 127.

28. Ligon, quoted in Kim, "Interview," 52.

29. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review* 8:4 (July-August 1940): 307; Greenberg's emphases.

30. See Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 164.

31. Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 2.

32. Flatley, *Pop Out*, 109, 111.

33. Hereafter abbreviated as *Triumph*. Kim chose the text and Ligon composed the image. Ligon, conversation with the author, January 2005.

34. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 183.

35. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 18.

36. T. J. Clark, "Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried," in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, 106.

37. Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 183.

38. Crimp, "Pictures," 186.

39. Ibid., 186.

40. Ibid., 177. Crimp is quoting Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5:10 (Summer 1967); Fried's emphasis.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 183.

43. "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Brunette and Wills, eds., *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, 20.

44. Harold Rosenberg, "Being Outside," *New Yorker*, 22 August 1977, 86. Thanks go to Debra Bricker Balken for directing me to this reference, and for several helpful and encouraging conversations about the subjects discussed here.

45. Meyer, "Borrowed Voices," esp. 25–35.

46. Daniel Buren, "Documentation of Conceptual Art," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Idea Art* (New York: Dutton, 1973), 178–179.

47. On this theme, see Miwon Kwon's important remarks on the contemporary aesthetics of nomadism in *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), esp. 100–137 and 156–167.

48. Diana Fuss, "Lesbian and Gay Theory: The Question of Identity Politics," in her *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.

49. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 259.

50. Ligon, quoted in Wadsworth Athenaeum, *Matrix* (Autumn 1997): 6.

51. In other examples dating from 1992, the massing of abstracted letter forms becomes a matter of overall composition. For valuable discussions of these works, see Huey Copeland, "Untitled (Jackpot!)," in Baerwaldt and Golden, eds., *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, 119–132; and Thelma Golden, *Stranger in the Village* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001).

52. Glenn Ligon, interviewed by Lauri D. Firstenberg, "Neo-archival and Textual Modes of Production: An Interview with Glenn Ligon," *Art Journal* 60:1 (Spring 2001): 43.

53. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 64 n46.

54. Ibid., 154. Fried's emphasis.

55. Ibid., 64 n46.

56. William James, "The Importance of Individuals," in *The Will to Believe* (1896; New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1931), 257.

57. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 163.

58. Meyer, "Borrowed Voices," 34.

59. Ibid., 35 n5.

60. Ibid., 19.

61. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Penguin, 1970), 157. Fanon's emphasis.

62. Ibid., 165.

63. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm of Reception of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 50.

64. Ibid., 50.

65. Yves Klein, "Sorbonne Lecture" (1959), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 805.

66. Jonathan Dollimore, "Desire and Difference," in Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, eds., *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 39.

67. Ibid., 18.

68. Ibid., 37.

5 THE AESTHETICS OF DISPOSSESSION: WILLIAM POPE.L'S PERFORMANCE INTERVENTIONS

1. See Lowery Stokes Sims, "Interview with William Pope.L," in Mark H. C. Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 63–65.

2. For one of Pope.L's fullest replies to the influence question, see Sims, "Interview," 63–64. For his most creative reply, see Pope.L, "Bocio," in Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L*, 70–73, first delivered as a talk at the symposium "Issues in African Contemporary Art," at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art in March 2000. It responds to Cair Crawford, "William Pope.L," *Nka: A Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Spring-Summer 1999): 67, in which Crawford compares Pope.L's work to West African *bocio*.

3. On this relationship, see David Joselit, "Between Objects and Actions," *Art in America* 86:11 (November 1998): 86–91, 144, a review of "Out of Actions:

Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979," a 1998 exhibition organized by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The article briefly discusses Pope.L's *Roach Motel Black* in terms of the actionist impulse in recent art. *Roach Motel Black* was a 1978 street performance for which Pope.L perambulated New York with a number of the insecticide units taped to his suit, which is disguised as a shelter, and attaching it to stationary objects. See also Russell Ferguson, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

4. On Pope.L's use of the term "symbolic actions," see Sims, "Interview," 63–65.

5. According to the artist, there had been "seven or eight installments" as of this writing. By that time he had reached Canal Street and gone through three costumes. Personal correspondence with the author, 29 August 2005.

6. For a brilliant discussion of this subject that has proved indispensable to my thinking about the public dimension of Pope.L's practice (as well as many other subjects), see Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

7. Martha Rosler's 1974–75 phototext work, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, combines with her classic essay, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," in *Martha Rosler: 3 Works* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981) to comprise an excellent study of this problem.

8. See Pope.L, interviewed by Martha Wilson, "William Pope.L," *Bomb* 55 (Spring 1996): 50–55.

9. Holland Cotter, "Art Review: Tombs, Pop Tarts and Pastries," *New York Times*, 23 August 2002, E29.

10. Pope.L, quoted in C. Carr, "In the Discomfort Zone," in Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L*, 49.

11. Pope.L, in Wilson, "William Pope.L," 51.

12. During the first part of the twentieth century in the United States, the term "white way" could apply to any illuminated thoroughfare. The "Great White Way" earned its name because of the many lights illuminating marquees and billboards along and near this segment of Broadway.

13. Credit for this distinction between movement and mobilization that sees the latter as "the tracking [and diverting] of traces in an accumulation of

materialized identity effects (those social productivities of race, class, gender, and sexuality)" is owed to Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1998), 208.

14. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development," in *Evictions*, 50. It is interesting to note that Deutsche's 1988 essay responds in part to a report released by the Commission on the Year 2000, appointed by Mayor Ed Koch, released in 1987, in light of the timing of *Great White Way*.

15. Quoted in Deutsche, "Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection* and the Site of Urban 'Revitalization,'" in *Evictions*, 37.

16. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), 188.

17. Paul Gilroy, "Exer(or)cising Power: Black Bodies in the Black Public Sphere," in Helen Thomas, ed., *Dance in the City* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 25–26.

18. Ibid., 30.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. See "Hate, Violence, and Death on Main Street USA: A Report on Hate Crimes and Violence against Homeless People Experiencing Homelessness in 2005," National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet no. 21 (January 2006).

21. See Robert D. McFadden, "Park Curfew Protest Erupts into a Battle and 38 Are Injured," *New York Times*, 8 August 1988, A1.

22. Mary Cantwell, "The Hippies Really Bug Us," *New York Times*, 20 August 1988, sec. 1, 26.

23. Alessandra Stanley, "Tompkins Sq. Park, Where Politics Again Turns Violent," *New York Times*, 30 May 1991, B1.

24. Evelyn Nieves, "Tensions Remain at Closed Tompkins Square Park," *New York Times*, 17 June 1991, B1.

25. In a possibly inadvertent yet telling endorsement of the decision, next to its report on Dinkins's action, the *Times* ran a photo depicting a *plein air* painter set up before his easel and brush while sitting at the mouth of midtown Manhattan's Grand Army Plaza. By captioning the photo "A City Ripe for Depiction," the paper enacted a powerful displacement of its own. See *New York Times*, 17 June 1991, B1.

26. Betsy Gotbaum, quoted in Nicholas King, "Letter from Tompkins Square Park," *City Journal* (Winter 1993).

27. Quoted in Emily M. Bernstein, "Tompkins Square, (Almost) United," *New York Times*, 6 August 1993, B1.

28. Pope.L., unpublished statement (2005). Permission the artist.

29. Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 124–125.

30. Georges Bataille, "The Labyrinth," in *Visions of Excess*, 174. Bataille's emphases.

31. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions*, 318.

32. Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2003), 24. Butler's emphasis.

33. Ibid., 26.

34. Ibid., 27.

35. Butler is not concerned with aesthetics as such in this work, but does comment on mainstream representations of AIDS, among others. Around the time of her book's 2003 publication, though, another example was particularly apposite: the status granted to the victims of the war in Iraq, from both sides, by a U.S. policy that would hide them from public view. Butler argues that the invisibility of these "ungrievable lives" effectively placed them outside the "the limits of human intelligibility," concealing the actuality of their loss. See Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," 35.

36. Ibid., 48.

37. On the appearance of this theme elsewhere in Pope.L's practice, see Carr, "In the Discomfort Zone."

38. Deutsche, "Uneven Development," 76.

39. In addition to Joselit's "Between Objects," two other texts situate Pope.L's work in this way: Kristine Stiles, "*Thunderbird Immolation:* Burning Racism," in Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L*, 26–42; and Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, exh. cat. (North Adams, Mass.: MASS MOCA; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004). The latter accompanied "The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere," a 2004 exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Pope.L's *Black Factory* appeared in this exhibition, which was its second stop on what would become a national tour spanning two years (to date). (The first was the Maine College of Art's Institute of Contemporary Art.) *The Interventionists* contains a brief discussion of the *Black Factory*, an artist's

statement by Pope.L, and an illuminating one-question, one-answer interview with Pope.L, conducted by C. Ondine Chavoya.

40. This question informs a core problematic in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

41. Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things (a Toy Story)," *Critical Inquiry* 24:4 (Summer 1998): 936.

42. For more on this work, including a discussion of Ernest and Julio Gallo's marketing strategy for Thunderbird, see Kristine Stiles, "*Thunderbird Immolation*," 26–42.

43. Ibid., 36.

44. This term is Bataille's. See "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess*, 159.

45. Ukeles's work was republished in "Artist Project: Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Art Activity* (1973) with Responses from Miwon Kwon and Helen Molesworth," *Documents* 10 (Fall 1997): 5–22.

46. Miwon Kwon, quoted in Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 71–97.

47. Bataille, "Psychological Structure of Fascism," 159.

48. See Carr, "In the Discomfort Zone," 50.

49. Ibid., 50.

50. Pope.L has done other work with this trope. The most notable example is a 1996 street performance, *Member (a.k.a. "Schlong Journey")*, in which he walked the length of 125th Street, thereby traversing Harlem, while wearing a collapsible six-foot-long white cardboard tube attached to the crotch of "a light-blue summer suit." Pope.L., unpublished statement (2005), n. p. Permission the artist.

51. Pope.L, "Notes on Crawling Piece, a.k.a. How Much Is That Nigger in The Window? (Summer 1991/Streets of New York City)," *Art Journal* 56 (Winter 1997): 66.

52. Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 128.

53. Pope.L, in Wilson, "William Pope.L," 55.

54. Pope.L, in Sims, "Interview," 66.

55. Pope.L, quoted in Mark H.C. Bessire, "The Friendliest Black Artist in America," in Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L*, 25.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Pope.L, quoted in Carr, "In the Discomfort Zone," 49. Pope.L's interpolation. Visual and olfactory signs of decay are commonplace in Pope.L's static work. For a particularly thorough treatment of this theme, see Bessire, "The Friendliest Black Artist," 22–31.

59. On this theme's philosophical relation to the problem of identity and difference, see Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

60. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1984; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 118.

61. Pope.L, quoted in Martha Wilson, "Limited Warranty," in Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L*, 45.

62. Pope.L, quoted in Carr, "In the Discomfort Zone," 49.

63. Gilroy, "Exer(or)cising Power," 29.

64. Pope.L, e-mail to the author, 28 August 2005.

65. Pope.L quoted in Wilson, "William Pope.L," 53.

66. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 102. Many thanks to Tess E. Chakkalakal for returning me to this text during a conversation about negotiating the humor in Pope.L's work.

67. Pope.L, quoted in Wilson, "William Pope.L," 53.

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